

PLUCK AND LUCK

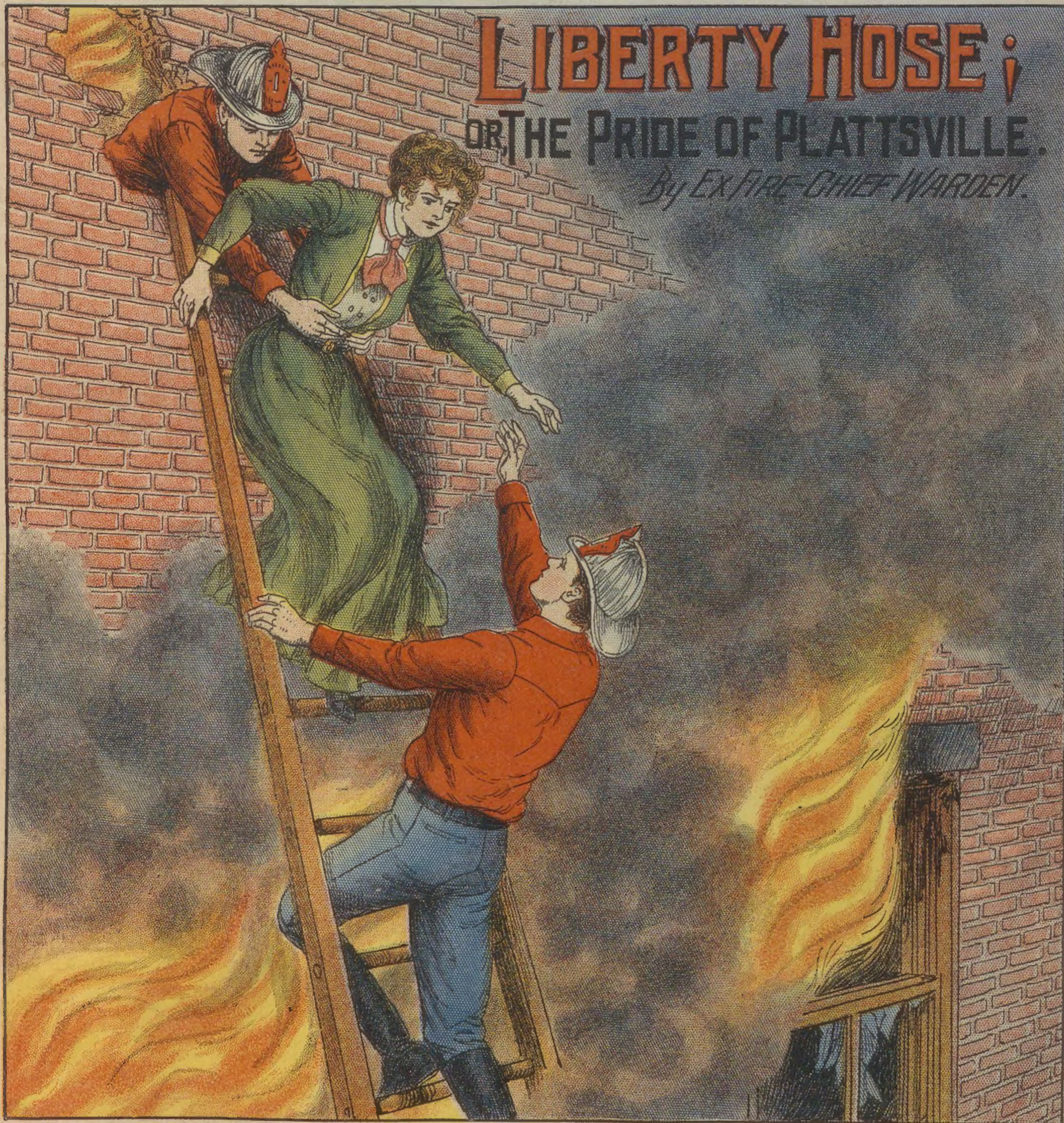
COMPLETE
STORIES OF ADVENTURE.

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"Let me help you through the opening." She held up her arms for him to take her, and he helped her, feet foremost, through the opening so that she succeeded in getting on the ladder. One of the Libertys was below.

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LIBERTY HOSE

OR,

The Pride of Plattsville

By EX-FIRE-CHIEF WARDEN.

CHAPTER I.

THE MEMBERS OF LIBERTY HOSE NO. 1.

On the evening of a warm day last summer all the members of Liberty Hose No. 1 were seated in the engine-house, village of Plattsville, State of New York.

As the doors of the apartment were open the lights of the lanterns on the walls would have displayed to the passerby the forms and bronzed faces of twenty firemen, ranging from nineteen to thirty years of age.

The foreman, Ned Tibbits, was a tall, wiry young man of twenty-two, with an eye like a hawk's, and a face which, although not handsome, had an expression of blended energy and good nature, which would at once have prepossessed any stranger in his favor.

Ned was a great favorite with the other members.

He was always ready with a song or a joke to pass away the time, and while he was not at all quarrelsome, there was no man more ready than he to resent an intentional insult.

In fact, in that latter respect all the members of Liberty Hose were alike.

Had you seen them sitting there in a semi-circle about their hose carriage, you would have guessed they were a plucky lot of fellows, from the spirited, manly look of every face.

The room they occupied was a large one on the first floor of a flat-roofed brick house. It was scrupulously clean, and the fire hats, trumpets, etc., were neatly hung on the walls. The hose carriage, polished until it shone like silver, was the best machine of the kind in Plattsville. It was the pride of the village.

"Come, Ned, strike up!" said one of the Liberties, as the foreman knocked the ashes from a cigar he had been smoking.

"All right!" said Ned. "What will you have?"

"Give us the Bully Smashers!" cried the first speaker.

"Yes, that's it—the Smashers!" said another.

"Go on—go on!" echoed several.

"Very well, gentlemen," said Ned; "if you want your ears filled, I can accommodate you."

In reality Ned was an excellent singer, and soon his full,

manly voice was heard as he chanted a rough and ready song about the Bully Smashers, an opposition engine in the village.

The song was greeted with much applause.

But scarcely had the cheering subsided when a bad egg, thrown with tremendous force from outside, just missed the foreman's head.

"That came from a Smasher!" cried Ned Tibbits.

As he spoke, he sprang up and rushed out, followed by several of his companions.

They separated, running about in different directions to look for the offender.

It was a dark night, but Ned fancied he saw the outlines of a human figure fleeing on along a lane leading off the street.

The person, whoever he was, was a swift runner, but he was no match for the nimble foreman, who finally overtook him. Ned could not see his face very well in the gloom.

"Who are you?" he cried, as he collared the fugitive.

"Let go of me!" was uttered in a hoarse voice, "or it will be the worse for you!"

"Come with me to the engine-house, so that we can all have a look at you," said Tibbits, as he drew the other along.

All at once the outline of something bright arose and fell in the darkness.

It was a clasp-knife, with a blade about six inches long. The owner had intended to plunge it into his captor's shoulder, but Ned was too quick for him.

The point of the keen blade had scarcely pricked his flesh, when he seized the wrist of the hand that held the weapon with an iron grip, and with his boot kicked the instrument from the grasp of its possessor.

"I want my knife! Let me get my knife!" howled the culprit.

"The knife is well enough where it is," answered Tibbits. "Come along!"

The other struggled vainly to release himself, and at last Ned had the satisfaction of dragging him into the engine-house, where the light fell full upon his form and features.

He was a small, rough-looking youth of eighteen, with uncombed hair, a flat nose and dirty face and garments.

"A Smasher—a Smasher!" echoed all the men.

"Yes, it's Jack Rann, the brother of Tim Rann, or Baldy Bald, as they call him, the foreman," said Tibbits.

"Why did you throw that egg?" asked one of the men.

"Let me go!" howled the youth, both frightened and angry at the same time. "I didn't do nothin'."

"Yes, you did, and this proves it," said Ned, pulling three or four eggs from the coat pocket of the prisoner. "Now, what have you to say for yourself?"

"I ain't got nothin' to say," answered Jack, sullenly.

"What shall we do with him, Liberties?" inquired Tibbits, turning to his men.

"Duck him in the horse pond!"

"No—put him under the pump!"

"I have a proposition to make, gentlemen," said Ned.

"Hear—hear!" cried several.

"Order—order, Liberties!" said Tibbits, as the hubbub of voices continued.

In a moment there was silence. Even Jack Rann, with mouth wide open and distended eyes, stood still to hear his fate.

"You are all aware," began Ned, "that there is a pig-pen close to the Smashers' engine-house?"

"The engine-house itself is a pig-pen!" shouted a voice.

"It is dirty enough for one, at any rate," said Tibbits.

"Well, the owner of the pig-pen is old Ben Thompson, who lives in a shanty close to his property. He will be ready enough to lend us one of his pigs for a mere trifle. To this pig we will lash our friend here and send him on to the Smashers!"

"Good—good!" shouted one of the men.

"A pig is too good for him!" cried another.

"I know it," said Ned, quickly, "but then we can't find anything worse."

"Brave—bravo!" cried several.

"How are we to get the pig here?" inquired one.

"Ben can bring it to us in his dog cart. I will go and speak for it if the rest of you will take care of the prisoner."

Ned was soon on his way. Ben Thompson's habitation was about a quarter of a mile off.

As the foreman passed the engine-house of the Smashers, he could see the members, clad in dirty red shirts, uproariously talking and laughing as they sat on benches smoking and drinking.

There was a whole demijohn of grog on a table there, with cards and dice.

"Hope Jack will get rid of all his eggs," said one of the men, as Tibbits, whom they did not recognize in the dim light, passed the open door.

The others laughed.

"If 'twasn't agin the law, I'd like to throw a bombshell in among them Liberties instead of eggs!" said another of the members.

Ned, with a quiet smile, passed on.

He knocked at Thompson's door. The proprietor in person opened it for him, and the bargain was soon made.

Tibbits went back to the Liberties, and half an hour later Thompson, who was a Welshman, brought the hog—an enormous one—which he dumped in the very door of the engine-house.

"Her has brought you the pig," he said, "but if you hurt it, her will have to charge for damages."

So saying, he drove away, while some of the men, having seized the hog, held it firmly in spite of its struggles to break away.

At length Jack Rann was firmly lashed to it with ropes, and away went the hog, squeaking viciously as it staggered along with its load.

Some of the Liberties followed it part of the way.

It made straight for the quarter of the village where its

pen was located, its unwilling rider kicking, squirming and howling in his vain effort to free himself.

There were but few houses on the road, but the windows of these flew open, and faces were seen peering out inquisitively.

The Liberties roared with laughter, especially when an elderly German lady came running out of a small building with a broom in her hand, and for a while made futile efforts to stop the hog.

At last the young firemen saw the animal approach the engine-house of the Smashers.

Out came the latter on hearing the din to discover the situation of one of their members.

Words were inadequate to describe the rage of the half drunken gang. They shook their clenched fists in the direction of the quarters of their rivals, and gave utterance to diabolical threats and curses.

CHAPTER II.

THE FIREMEN'S BALL.

On the following night the Liberties met to talk over their arrangements for a ball, which they intended to give at the Plattsville Hotel—a large old-fashioned house, kept by a German and his wife by the name of Schwartz.

"I'd recommend each of you to bring a club there, and to fill your pockets with stones," said Ned, laughing.

"Why?" inquired Tom Loper, a spirited young fellow on his right, whose sister Tibbits had always admired as the prettiest girl in the village.

"On account of the Smashers. Depend upon it, they will not leave us alone."

"Schwartz has promised to have policemen there."

"I know he has promised it, but I also know he is too stingy to keep his word. Perhaps he thinks his wife is equal to two policemen."

"She's a whopper, that's a fact. Do you remember the time she whipped one of the Smashers for breaking her ginger beer bottle?"

"Yes; she could whip two men any day. She is as strong as an elephant. Wouldn't be a bad plan to have her for one of our members."

"That wouldn't do. She weighs nearly two hundred pounds, and could fight better than she could run."

"Well, laying all joking aside, I hope Schwartz will have the police there, for the ladies' sake. They would be frightened to death in case of trouble."

As Ned spoke, the beautiful face of Fanny Loper, whom he intended to escort to the ball, arose before his mind.

He did not like the idea of anything occurring to frighten her or mar her pleasure in the slightest degree.

"The worst of it is there are no policemen within ten miles of here," said Tom Loper. "However, to make a sure thing of it, I will go and engage a few to come, after I leave my office."

"That will not be until six o'clock; the ball opens at nine."

"I think I can get back in time."

As all the other men had business which would keep them until a still later hour, Loper's plan was agreed upon.

On the next day, at nine o'clock, the ball party was present.

It was held in a large room on the second floor, decorated with garlands of flowers, and with the words "Liberty Hose" handsomely worked in gilt letters on festoons of silk cloth looped from the ceiling.

The members and their friends numbered about a hundred.

The dancers took their places, the band struck up a lively

waltz, and the forms of the ladies and their partners were soon whirling about the room.

Perhaps the most graceful dancers there were Ned Tibbits and Fanny Loper.

Fanny was a tall, finely proportioned girl, and she carried herself well, now and then giving a slight toss to her queenly head, on the back of which her black hair was rolled up in luxuriant masses.

Tibbits, exceedingly light of foot, and at the same time possessed of considerable strength, seemed well matched with such a partner.

All were enjoying themselves, and Mrs. Schwartz, with her arms bared to the shoulder, was bustling about, bringing beer and other refreshments, when, as she entered the bar-room below, which she had left in charge of her husband during her temporary absence, she saw Baldy Bald come in with two other members of the Smashers.

Tim Rann, or "Baldy," as he was most commonly termed, was a short, thick-set fellow, with huge breast and shoulders, a large bull neck, bloodshot eyes and coarse features. He wore a dirty red shirt, and a loose handkerchief was tied about his throat. His companions were hang-dog looking persons.

"What's you want?" somewhat sharply inquired Mrs. Schwartz.

"What's I want? Do yer call that grammar—sa-a-y?" cried Baldy.

"Never mind der grammar," answered Mrs. Schwartz. "You hafs noting to do mit der grammar."

"I ain't, eh?"

"Come, tell me what's you wants!" cried Mrs. Schwartz, more sharply than before.

"Well, let's see! What's yer got there?" inquired Baldy, gruffly, as he glanced about him. "What'll yer take, boys?" he added, turning to his companions.

"Old port," grunted one of them.

"All right! Come, stir yerself, Mother Schwartz, and git the port."

Mrs. Schwartz turned to get the bottle, when Baldy, picking up a glass of beer, which the woman had brought back from upstairs and placed on the counter, drank the beverage almost at one gulp.

Mrs. Schwartz, the moment she turned toward the men, noticed that the lager was missing.

"Who peen drinks dem peer?" she inquired, fiercely.

Baldy quietly proceeded to help himself and his companions to the port.

"Of course we mean to pay you fur it, so don't yer go fur to gittin' scared."

"All right—if you pays for dem all."

Having drank, Baldy and his companions turned as if to go out.

But Mrs. Schwartz called to them to come back and pay her.

"Yer can wait fur yer money, I guess," said Baldy.

"No, no! You would starfs a woman to def waitings for der money. I must haf dem money now!"

"You can't have it!"

"Planks down der needful—come!" said Mr. Schwartz, who stood behind the counter, both hands in his pockets, smoking a long pipe.

He moved to help his spouse, who now advanced, and seizing Baldy by the collar, commenced to shake him, shouting in a loud voice:

"Der money! der money! or, mein Gott, I shakes all der liquor out mit you!"

This was the moment for which Baldy had waited. Drawing off with his fist, he struck the man in the face.

"Now, Smashers!" he shouted; "up and let 'em have it, my bullies!"

In an instant, from outside, where they had been waiting for this signal, all the other members of the company came pouring into the room. Some of them had huge stones, which they hurled at the bottles and glasses on the shelves behind the counter, while others shouted to the Liberties to come down and prevent the disturbance, if they were able.

Mrs. Schwartz did her duty nobly.

The moment Baldy struck her husband, she threw herself at his throat, which she caught with both hands, squeezing it with all her might.

He was getting black in the face, when, by a furious kick, he succeeded in forcing her to let go her hold. Then she stepped back, caught up a heavy chair, and sent it flying at his head.

Had it struck him he would have been knocked senseless.

But he dodged it, and then bounded toward her.

Not a step did she budge, but as he came on she planted a tremendous left-hander between his eyes, almost stunning him.

But now she was seized by several others, and although she still fought, striking and scratching, she was finally dragged into another room, and with strong ropes was tied to one of the legs of a heavy billiard table.

Meanwhile Mr. Schwartz, whom the rowdies were beating over the head with bottles and broken chair legs, kept shouting for help.

The Liberties were endeavoring to quiet the ladies, who were half crazy with terror.

"Oh, dear!" cried Fanny Loper to Tibbits. "What shall we do?"

"We will go and drive the rascals off! Your brother will probably be here soon with the police," said Ned.

He was moving off when Fanny caught him by the arm.

"No!" she cried, in a voice of mingled anxiety and tenderness, which went straight to the foreman's heart; "you must not go! I would not have you peril yourself. Better wait for the police."

"The loafers may kill Mr. and Mrs. Schwartz before that time," answered Tibbits.

Summoning his men, and requesting the ladies to remain in the room, he placed himself at the head of the members and rushed down into the bar-room.

His party was joined by the male friends of the firemen, so that in all they numbered about fifty.

The Smashers, who had been joined by all the roughs in the village, could count seventy in their party.

The appearance of Ned Tibbits and his followers was greeted with a derisive shout, given in imitation of the crowing of a rooster.

Ned, with some of the other members, first devoted his attention to the roughs who were beating Mr. Schwartz.

He picked up a couple of heavy stone jugs and hurled them at the heads of the men about the German.

Two of them let go their hold and, spinning around, dropped senseless to the floor.

Just then the click of a pistol was heard, and Tibbits saw Baldy pointing a revolver at his head.

The next moment the sharp report of the pistol was heard, but missed its aim, for one of Ned's friends, who, with the others, had fought his way to the spot where the ruffian stood, dashed his arm downward, causing the bullet to go through the floor.

The fight was now becoming general and very desperate.

"Give it to them, Liberties! Let them have it!" cried Ned.

He sprang lightly over the counter, and was soon in the thick of the fight, showering telling blows right and left.

With a cheer the Liberties followed their foreman.

After some terrible fighting the roughs were driven from the bar-room.

But they only went a short distance, where Baldy was about to rally them for another attack, when the steady, unmistakable tramp of the coming police was heard in an adjoining street.

Ten minutes later not a rough was to be seen near the hotel. They had all separated, going in different directions.

The police reached the hotel with Tom Loper.

"Too late!" said Ned, who, although bruised about the face and on other parts of his body, was as cheerful as a cricket.

None of the Liberties or their friends were sufficiently hurt to prevent their rejoining the ladies, although the marks left upon them did not improve their personal appearance.

Again the band struck up, after the late combatants had rested, and again they were whirling about in the merry quadrille and waltz.

"I was so frightened," said Fanny to Tibbits. "I thought you would be killed."

They were at the time seated for a rest on one of the lounges.

Ned laughed.

"We firemen are so used to things of the kind that we think nothing of them."

At that moment Mrs. Schwartz, who had been freed from the billiard table, came up to Tibbits.

"Noble mans!" she cried. "You haf got on der right side mit me forefer. Oh, you noble poy!"

And she patted him on the shoulder with her fat hand.

"Don't be jealous," said Ned to Fanny, when Mrs. Schwartz was out of hearing.

Fanny smiled, and then, in a slightly tremulous voice, she said:

"What right have I to be jealous?"

"I will soon give you the right," whispered Ned, "if you will let me."

"What do you mean, Mr. Tibbits?" said Fanny, blushing.

"Well," he answered, "there's no use of keeping back the truth from you. I made up my mind that I would never tell any woman I loved her until I was sure of a favorable answer. I don't know that you have ever given me much encouragement, Fanny, but when I now say I love you, as I do with my whole heart and soul, I hope your answer will be the kind I long for?"

"Answer to what?" said Fanny, looking up archly from the corners of her eyes.

"To the question whether my love is returned."

"I—I have always loved you," murmured Fanny.

"That's just the kind of answer I like," said Ned. "You have made a happy man of me!"

CHAPTER III.

PLAYING THE HOSE.

At two o'clock in the morning the ball party at Schwartz's "broke up," and the firemen and their friends started for their homes.

Ned Tibbits, with Fanny on his arm, was slowly making his way toward the young girl's home.

He was happy, as he had told his fair companion, and as Fanny was no coquette, she did not mind making him still happier by gently pressing, now and then, the arm of the gallant young fireman whom shortly before she had consented to accept for her husband.

"Fanny," said he, at length, "you're a woman after my own heart. There's no sawdust about you."

"Not a bit, Ned," answered the young girl. "I never like these 'butter-won't-melt-in-your-mouth' sort of women! I am not too shy to own any sentiment I feel. I love you, Ned, and that's the truth."

A noise something like the scraping of a spoon over a glass dish might have been heard at this juncture, followed by the exclamation in a feminine voice:

"Oh, Ned, don't!"

Then there was a sweet, merry laugh, for Fanny had enjoyed the rousing "smack" her lover had bestowed upon her pretty mouth.

At the door of her residence, Ned again kissed her.

Fanny then bade him good-night, and ran upstairs to her mother.

At half-past six the young girl awoke from a refreshing sleep, hastily made her toilet, partook of a frugal breakfast, and was then off for the Plattsville cotton factory, in which she worked.

There she toiled hard, her excellent health and constitution not suffering in the least from her having been up so late on the night before. It was her wages, joined to those of her brother, that enabled the little family to live neatly and comfortably, and her invalid mother to obtain many things which she required.

It was Saturday, and all the members of Liberty Hose got away from their shops and offices earlier than they did on other days.

At four o'clock, as Ned Tibbits, on his way to the engine-house, passed the cotton factory, he could not help looking up at a certain window, near which he knew Fanny was at her work.

The young girl saw him and nodded to him, with a blush and a smile.

"Poor thing!" thought Ned, as he walked on, "how close and hot it must be for her up there! We Liberties are going to get up a chowder party in a few weeks, and Fanny shall go with me, as most all the rest of the boys are going to bring company along with them. She shall have one holiday this summer if I can bring it about."

Ned finally reached the engine-house, where a few of his company had already assembled.

"Three cheers, boys, for the smasher of smashers!" cried one. "Oh, didn't he 'sock' it to them last night!"

Three cheers and a tiger were given for Ned.

"Gentlemen," said the young foreman, "I propose three times three for the most distinguished of last night's warriors. You all know whom I have allusion to."

"Who's that?" inquired Tom Loper.

"Mrs. Schwartz," cried Ned.

Roars of laughter greeted the mention of the woman's name.

"Now, boys," said Ned, "let's take our machine to the pump and see how the new hose works to-day."

This proposal was greeted with applause.

The engine was soon rattling down the street, with the boys pulling some good pounds, as the Liberties always did when they "warmed" to their work.

The pump was reached in a few minutes, and in a short time Ned had the hose playing.

As there were but four men to work it, the stream it sent was at first only thirty feet high, but presently the four were joined by five more of the company, and Ned then had the satisfaction to see a spout a hundred feet high shoot up from the hose.

His men, cheering, pumped away.

"O-ho! look at them beats!" was uttered in a hoarse voice

from the other side of the way. "Oh, you broken-backed bummers!"

Ned saw that the speaker was Jack Rann, who was peering from behind the coal-box of a grocery about thirty yards off.

The young foreman paid no attention to him, but kept on playing the hose.

"Oh, look at the stroke of 'em!" continued Rann. "I could squirt a better stream than that 'ere with tobacco juice!"

He opened his mouth to illustrate, when bang! came a lump of dirt between his parted lips.

"Ow-wow-wow!" still howled Jack Rann, spitting the dirt out of his mouth. "Them Liberties threwed a stone at me!"

"Shut up! What's the matter with yer, yer big coward?" cried his brother Baldy, who at that moment appeared around a corner, with all the Bully Smashers at his back, and half a dozen roughs besides.

The gang soon reached a spot whence they could see the few Liberties still playing the hose.

Baldy rolled up his shirt-sleeves, then clapping both hands to his sides, he made a derisive noise like the crowing of a rooster.

Ned and his companions paid not the slightest attention to the noise.

"Boys," said Baldy, turning to his crowd, "I'll tell you what we'll do; why, we'll jist walk up to them quills and cut their old hose in two for 'em!"

At the head of his gang he advanced towards the Liberties, when Bill Walsh, who now held the hose, Ned having surrendered it to him, pointed it straight towards the gang.

"Pump away, boys!" cried the plucky little fellow. "Tell you what, they can put in any amount of liquor, those bummers, but we'll see how they'll stand water!"

"Good!" cried Ned. "Pump away, men! Give it to 'em, Bill, right and left. They can have all the water they want!"

Splash! gurgle! hiss! ker-whish! went the stream from the hose-pipe, drenching the Smashers from head to foot, and almost taking away their breath so that they were obliged to beat a retreat.

They picked up stones, and were about advancing to throw them, when suddenly a noise was heard which sent a thrill to the hearts of all present.

It was the clang of the town bell, followed by a far-away voice, faintly borne to their ears:

"Fire—fire—fire!"

CHAPTER IV.

AT THE FIRE.

The clang of the bell, the distant voice, the pattering of approaching feet, and the other noises that are heard when the alarm strokes are first sounded, are of course familiar to everyone.

Not quicker does the lightning flash than did the stream of water vanish from the hose-pipe.

The hose was rolled up in a twinkling on the engine, and while the Smashers were hurrying to procure theirs, Ned Tibbits was urging his company to pull their best.

To reach the locality of the fire they would be obliged to pass their engine-house. There they paused an instant to hastily clap on their fire hats, and then Tibbits, springing out, roared through his trumpet in his deep, bass voice:

"Roll along, Liberties—roll along!"

The few men did their best. They had not made forty yards when they were joined by every member of the company.

A more gallant-looking crowd could hardly be imagined. They were all young fellows full of health, life and good spirits. Most of them wore red shirts, and you ought to have seen what a show they made as they went rattling down the street. There was not a mealy-mouthed boy among them. They all knew just what they were about, and they meant to do it in the best way. You can bet your life on that.

"Ah, now, them's the fellers!" cried Jim Dale, a boy of fourteen, the hardest nut for his age in the town, as he saw the Smashers go dashing past, with Baldy roaring out to them like a bull.

But when he saw the Liberties come rattling along, you better believe the Smashers were nowhere. The Liberties took the shine out of 'em.

"There goes the daring boy—he's a darling boy, he is!" cried Jim Dale, as Ned Tibbits, tall and sinewy in his blue shirt, tightly-fitting black trousers and fire cap, with his lean, good-natured face and piercing dark eyes, went running past, his trumpet under his arm.

Ned had a peculiar way of his own of encouraging his boys when running to a fire.

He never ranted or blustered to them through his trumpet. Although his voice was a clear, distinct bass, there was something indescribably pleasant about it.

It came forth in short, quick, abrupt jerks that would have almost made you laugh, and hence its popularity. It was like the momentary blast of a trumpet.

"Roll her—roll her!" shouted Ned, through his trumpet.

The Liberties gained on the Smashers.

Soon they passed them. There was great excitement in the town. Men and women were seen running in the direction of the fire.

Ned saw the thick, black smoke rolling up above a cluster of houses ahead.

A thrill went through him.

He now knew it must be the cotton factory which was on fire.

Fanny Loper worked there. Was she safe?

For a moment the brain of the gallant young fireman seemed to spin around as he asked himself that question.

But it was only for an instant. He saw a troop of frightened-looking girls—employees of the factory—not far off, and this put his mind at ease.

If they had escaped, it was likely Fanny was out of danger, too.

"Hurry up," screamed a woman, who was watching the fire from a house-top. "It is the factory, and many of the girls in the upper story can't get out."

This terrible news dashed Ned's hopes to the ground.

Fanny was one of those who worked in the upper story, and she was doubtless among the imperilled girls.

"Make her fly, boys," he shouted to his men. "Death is at work in the factory."

This seemed to put steam in the legs of the Liberties.

Ten minutes later they were in front of the burning factory. Almost the whole of the lower story was in flames.

At different windows of the upper story appeared the pale faces of about twenty frightened girls.

Tibbits looked in vain for Fanny. She was not at any of the windows.

The young foreman, although his heart misgave him, was cool and decided in every movement.

There were ladders soon at hand, and placing one of these at an upper window, Tibbits mounted, shouting meanwhile through his trumpet to the Liberties, whom he had got to work with the hose on the lower story:

"Pump away, men, pump away!"

The girls almost pitched headforemost over each other in their haste to get on the ladder.

A dense volume of smoke pouring through the open window over their heads and all around them betokened that the rapid fire had already reached the upper story.

"Keep cool, ladies! time enough, ladies!" said Tibbits, as he helped girl after girl to the ladder.

"No—no! we'll all be burned to death before we reach the ground!" cried the last one, pointing beneath her.

The flames from a window on the lower story were streaming out in close proximity to the ladder, threatening to burn it in two.

Sixteen of the rescued girls had already reached the ground; the other four shrank up against the ladder, afraid to go further on account of the fire beneath.

Little Bill Walsh was a plucky boy.

He and Tom Loper ran up the ladder at the call of the foreman, and got the girls down just in time to insure their safety. One girl's petticoat took fire, but Bill put it out with his hands, which were badly scorched. He did not mind it, however, for his skin was as tough as leather.

"Do you see anything of my sister, Ned?" called Loper, looking up through the rolling clouds of smoke.

But Ned was not in sight. He had heard his Fanny's scream, and had sprang into the upper room through the window.

"Where are you, Fanny? Keep up your spirits, Fanny. Here's your Ned, and he's the boy that's going to save you!"

Again that scream.

At the same moment there was a crash outside, and Ned knew that the ladder he had climbed had burned through and fallen to the ground.

The apartment in which he now was was so full of smoke that it was difficult to breathe.

"Where are you, Fanny?" he again called, moving in the direction of the scream he had heard.

He saw an open door in a partition ahead of him.

This partition was partly in flames, and the fire was circling about the doorway.

He sprang to the opening. At first he could see nothing for the smoke, but an instant later he made out the form of Fanny Loper, shrinking against the wheel of a spinning machine.

Directly in front of her, leaping up through the flooring, was a line of flame which had hindered her from joining the other girls in the next apartment.

The fire had evidently originated in the room below this part of the factory, for the flames had already made fearful headway.

Ned at once perceived that he could not hope to reach Fanny alive through that vortex of fire.

He ran to the window, and his face and his fire hat were indistinctly seen through the smoke by those below, as he shouted through his trumpet:

"Hose up here, and play away, Liberties!"

A ladder was soon up to the window, and game little Bill Walsh darted up, hose in hand, followed by Tom Loper.

Some of the Smashers had placed another ladder against a window on the opposite side of the building, and Baldy himself now appeared, playing a stream into the apartment with his hose.

As soon as he caught sight of Bill Walsh at the opposite window he uttered an oath, and directed the stream against the young fellow's face.

"Halloo, you bummer, that's your game, is it?" cried Bill, and it would have done you good to see the plucky little rooster stick to his post, and send so powerful a stream into

the face of Baldy that the latter was obliged to crouch down to save himself from being suffocated.

And that was the way things had always turned out so far. The Liberties seemed to get the best of the Smashers every time.

"This way!" cried Ned, from the room which was blazing—the one which, as it were, held Fanny in a fiery cage; "this way with that stream, and play for life!"

Bill sent the spout, hissing and sputtering, in the direction of the voice, although he could not see his foreman on account of the smoke.

"Shall I jump in with you, Ned?"

"No, stay where you are."

"Do you see my sister?" yelled Tom Loper over Bill's shoulder.

"Yes, play away there—play away, Liberties.

Ker-whish-sh-sh! swish—swish! went the water, while the fire sputtered and hissed as if in derision.

Tom Loper was about leaping into the apartment through the open window, thinking he could help to save his sister, when the ladder, burned through below, slid to the ground on its lower end, and then went over sideways.

Some of the people below endeavored to hold it, but in vain.

Over it went, and in another second Tom and Bill must have been dashed with it to the ground had it not been caught by an iron brace projecting from the woodwork of the factory, between the upper and lower stories.

The brace held the ladder, and although their insides fairly jumped at the shock, the young men contrived to hold on.

There was a cheer from the crowd below at the way in which the plucky little Walsh had kept his hold.

Not only had he used both hands, but his teeth had been fastened in one of the rounds, to which he had hung like a tiger-cat to a piece of meat.

He was a perfect little gamecock, that Bill Walsh, and, excepting Ned, the Liberties hadn't a better member.

The two young men descended to the ground.

They endeavored to find another place for the ladder, but the flames were now rolling up in great broad sheets on both sides of the factory, so that they were obliged to give up the attempt.

"Boys," cried Bill Walsh, "what shall we do for Tibbits? Something's got to be done. We must not leave our game foreman to die up there in the fire!"

Meanwhile Tibbits, up amid flame and smoke, had, thanks to the stream which Walsh had sent into the burning room while on the ladder, succeeded in reaching Fanny's side.

"Ned, dear Ned," she gasped, "it's lost—everything is lost!"

"No—no, not yet!" said Ned. "Don't lose your head, Fanny. Keep up your spirits. We're in a tight place, I know, but you can just make up your mind that I'm the boy to work a way through it."

"How can you?" said Fanny. "See, the fire is all around us!"

"I'll punch my way through somehow or other," said Ned.

As he spoke, he picked up a long iron crowbar and commenced to work at the wall, which was the end one of the building.

A few feet behind him the fire, relieved from the extinguishing stream of water that had been played upon it, was making faster headway than ever.

Through the floor, as already stated, it had forced its way, forming a yawning fire-pit or gulf only three yards from the lovers.

Unless, therefore, Tibbits could manage to knock away some of the wall in front of him, and also some of the outside

boarding of the building, the doom of his fair companion and himself was seated.

Poor Fanny watched him anxiously. She was half stifled by the smoke and the intense heat.

"This is what takes the sap out of a fellow, you can bet!" cried Ned, as he continued to ply the crowbar, with the perspiration running down his face in streams.

"Take a rest," said Fanny, pitying, even at that dreadful moment, her perspiring lover. "You will kill yourself before you accomplish your purpose."

"No, I won't," answered Ned. "This crowbar has got to do its work, sure pop!"

He banged away with the instrument, and at last, to his intense delight, it went through the outside sheathing of the building, making an aperture in which the foreman could now easily work the crowbar.

"How good that feels!" cried Fanny.

In fact, the fresh air blowing through the aperture her lover had made afforded great relief to the half-smothered girl.

The foreman, still plying the crowbar, soon had made an aperture large enough for the young girl to crawl through.

He thrust his head through it, for the fire had not yet reached the end of the building, and applied his trumpet to his mouth.

"Where are you, Liberties? Ladder and hose this way!" rang his deep voice above the noise of the roaring flames and the shouting of voices below.

Bill Walsh heard that voice, and he pricked up his ears like a little war-horse.

In a moment he and Tom Loper had shouldered a ladder, and this was soon placed so that the upper end nearly reached the aperture which Tibbits had made in the building.

"Now, my dear!" cried Ned, holding out his arms, "let me help you through the opening."

She held up her arms for him to take her, and he helped her, feet foremost, through the opening, so that she succeeded in getting on the ladder.

One of the Liberties was below with the hose ready, but he had to wait before he could mount and use it until Fanny could get down.

She was none of your slow girls. She had good active limbs of her own, and the way she went down that ladder made even the Smashers cheer.

Meanwhile Ned had resumed his work with the crowbar, so as to make the opening large enough to permit the passage of his broad shoulders.

All at once his arm was seized; a strong hand also caught him by the back of his coat collar and pulled him away from the opening.

He turned quickly to see Baldy, who, scorched and blackened by fire and smoke, presented a truly hideous appearance.

The ladder on which the Smasher's foreman had stood had burned through below, and he had been obliged to get into the building through the window.

After vainly searching for some place of exit, he had entered the room occupied by Tibbits, and leaping across the fire-chasm, he had fallen, half-senseless, on the other side.

But he was a strong man, possessed of much vitality, and he quickly recovered himself to rush at Ned, as shown, and pull him from the opening.

"See here now!" he cried, "yer needn't think you're goin' to escape in that way! I've a grudge agin you, I have, and you won't leave this place alive if I can help it! You can just make up yer mind to that!"

"Fool!" cried Ned. "This is no time to kick up a muss, anyhow!"

As he spoke, he drove his fist into Baldy's face with a force that knocked him back, causing him to release his hold.

CHAPTER V.

NED'S PERIL.

Baldy was knocked so far back that he must have fallen into the fire-pit but for his antagonist, who, springing forward, caught him by the cuff of his coat in time to save him from so dreadful a fate.

"I'm not the boy to see a man—even my worst enemy—go down into such a fire-hole!" cried Tibbits.

Baldy, gasping for breath, permitted Ned to draw him a little way from the burning chasm.

"You saved me," he growled, "but I ain't going to spare yer for all that. Ever since the day that Fanny gave me the sack for such a long-legged moke as you are, I jist made up my mind that I'd have yer life if I could git it. The time's come now, and yer may as well know. Yer'll never leave this place alive, and that's all there is about it."

"Don't get in a sweat about it, Baldy," he said. "I'll live my time out, I daresay, in spite of you or any other man."

But Baldy now caught the speaker by the throat, and pulled him, with an irresistible jerk, towards the fire chasm.

"Down into that fire-hole you go!" he roared. "Yer time is up, and I'm goin' ter send yer down!"

Tibbits grappled with his foe, and a desperate struggle took place on the edge of that blazing pit.

Perhaps Baldy was the stronger of the two, but it is certain that Tibbits was the most active.

Now, boys, I'll tell you about a trick he had, whenever thus engaged in a "rough-and-tumble." It was a trick of his own, and there were few men that could stand it without caving in.

In the first place he allowed time enough to pass for his antagonist to get pretty well blown with his exertions. Then he suddenly caught him by the hair, pulled his head back, and rapidly punched him under the chin.

Vainly Baldy endeavored to recover himself from the effect of those terrific blows.

Half choked with the fire and smoke which poured up from the chasm, while the fist of his opponent made his brain fairly spin around, he was about to cry out: "Enough!" when the floor beneath Ned's feet cracked and sank, compelling the young foreman to make an effort to gain a firmer footing.

Baldy's eyes glowed with exultation—like those of a savage beast, and with one tremendous exertion of strength, he swung Tibbits toward the fire chasm.

But Ned was game to the last. Although it seemed as if nothing could now save him from pitching headforemost into the flaming cavern, he kept his hold of Baldy, determined, if he went, to drag him with him.

To save himself from going, the Smasher straddled both legs, and thus, without intending it, he enabled Ned to regain his balance, which he had no sooner done than he continued his favorite trick.

"Enough—enough!" gasped Baldy, as he sat down on the floor.

"Ye've got the better of me this time, but I'll fix yer yet. I've sworn to take your life, and I'll keep my word, unless yer make tracks from this 'ere town of Plattsville, for there ain't room here for both of us nohow!"

Ned picked up the crowbar and continued his work at the outside planking of the building.

Bill Walsh had ere this arrived at the opening, hose in hand,

and began to play a stream into the room, but he had not been able to see the occupants on account of the smoke.

In fact, the smoke would have smothered both Tibbits and Baldy, but for the open windows of the other apartment, through which some of it found egress, and through which the wind was blowing.

Ned soon had made an opening large enough to pass through.

Bill Walsh, who had pointed his hose somewhat to the left of the position occupied by his friend, now saw him plainly.

"Give me the hose!" cried Ned.

It was passed to him, and he commenced to play it all about the burning room.

The fire had crept up at the sides and loosened the ends of the beams that supported the roof.

Creak—creak! ker-ack—ker-ack! warningly sounded the roof.

"Better get out of that as quick as you can, Ned," said Walsh.

Baldy now crawled through the opening, and got on the ladder, which he began to descend.

"Come, Ned, come!" continued Walsh.

All at once the roof began to sway.

"For your life, Ned, quick!" shouted Walsh.

"Oh, Ned, do come down!" called Fanny, at the foot of the ladder.

"Coming," answered Ned.

But he could not resist the temptation to play another stream into the fire-chasm—just one more before he left.

As he did so a portion of the roof sank with a loud crack, and a moment later, with a terrific crash, the whole weighty mass came tumbling into the room below.

Ned had sprung to the opening when he saw the roof coming down, but he would have been buried in the ruin had it not been for Bill Walsh, who, catching him by the collar of his coat, pulled him with a powerful jerk through the aperture, headforemost, upon the ladder.

Ned saved himself from tumbling by seizing one of the rounds with his hands, while Walsh held him by his long legs above.

The people below could not help laughing at the figure cut by Ned while in this position, but he soon regained his proper posture, and then there was a rousing cheer, as, with a graceful wave of the hand, he bowed to the multitude.

The factory was now one mass of fire.

Both the Liberties and the Smashers did their best, but the building was burned nearly to the ground.

As no more could be done the firemen started for their respective engine-houses, put their engines in place and returned to their homes.

Ned's rescue of the factory girls became afterwards the talk of the town, and Baldy was almost beside himself with envy.

He did his best to disparage his rival, but when he found that he was unsuccessful, he gave up the attempt.

CHAPTER VI.

THE TARGET EXCURSION.

About a week after the fire the members of Liberty Hose all met in the engine-house, arrayed in red shirts, with white belts about their waists, and carrying brightly-polished rifles.

Tibbits, in addition to his rifle, had a handsome sword at his side.

The company were going on a target excursion, and of course Ned was their captain.

The prize to be shot for was a silver cup, with Liberty Hose carriage beautifully engraved upon one side, and a fireman's hat and crossed trumpets on the other.

The cup was attached to the top of the target, the chosen bearer of which was a person named Frederick Washington Alexander Honey, a negro of short stature, with a round, shining face, rolling eyes, and a sleek, fat paunch, which shook like a jelly-bag every time he laughed.

"Attention!" cried Tibbits, as he threw away the stump of the cigar he had been smoking.

The band, consisting of a fifer, a drummer and a trumpet player, went outside and took their places.

"Fall in!" was Tibbits next command.

He was promptly obeyed.

"Shoulder arms!" was the next order, and then: "Forward, march!"

The drum sounded, and soon the shrill piping of the fife was heard.

The boys made a gallant show, with their shining rifles glistening in the sunlight as they marched along, but Tibbits, sword in hand, was the center of attraction, and many bright eyes shot soft, admiring glances at his tall form and good-natured face.

Although not at all conceited, yet Ned had a way of walking as if conscious of the many graces of his person—a sort of swinging gait which was especially liked by the young women of Plattsville.

The cheers which resounded from the spectators on all sides seemed to tickle Honey, the negro, from the crown of his woolly head to the soles of his shining, creaky boots. He grinned from ear to ear, and his sleek belly rolled from side to side as he kept time to the music of the band.

You would have thought by his manner that Honey believed all the cheers which were given were bestowed upon him personally, and on no one else in the company.

His head was elevated, the nostrils of his flat nose were expanded, and the whites of his eyes rolled in an ecstasy of pride and delight.

No wonder people cheered the Liberties.

A finer company of men never turned out, and you ought to have seen the pretty right wheel they made when, at the corner of the street, Tibbits, raising his sword, gave the order.

It would have done you good to hear the remarks that were made about them.

At length they entered the street where was situated the house in which Fanny Loper resided.

Fanny was on the front stoop, dressed in white, with her black hair neatly done up on her handsome head.

Plattsville didn't own many girls like her, I can tell you, and no wonder Tibbits felt proud and happy when he caught sight of her in the distance.

It was a noble sight when at last the company halted before the stoop, and Ned, raising his sword, gave the command to order arms.

The way the boys brought down the butts of their muskets all together and at once would have done credit to the best company ever drilled.

Then Tibbits, coloring a little, as any young man would have done under the circumstances, walked up to the stoop with his easy, swaying gait, and, ascending the steps, made just the prettiest bow that ever you saw to Fanny.

She hung her head at first, blushing more than ever, then her dark eyes rested softly and admiringly on her gallant lover as she presented the wreath to him.

This beautiful sight was too much for the boys.

You ought to have seen how gracefully he bowed again as he took the wreath, pressing it first to his heart and then to his lips.

"Good for Ned! Three cheers for Miss Loper!" etc., were heard on all sides.

Little did the company imagine that at that very moment the gaze of a pair of fierce, evil eyes was fixed upon their gallant foreman, with an expression revealing the bitterest hate.

The evil eyes belonged to Baldy, who, crouching behind a thick hedge fifty yards off, was concealed by the shrubbery.

"Go on, you mokes," he muttered to himself; "cheer away as loud as you like. It won't be many hours from now before there'll be some black cloth hangin' in front of your engine-house, and that 'ere foreman of yours will be stretched out a stiff corpse!"

From Ned his gaze wandered to beautiful Fanny, who stood smiling and bowing in response to the cheers given in her favor.

The sight made him feel like a demon.

The fact that Fanny had once scornfully refused to accept him for a lover, because she preferred Tibbits, had inspired him with a fierce desire for revenge upon his more fortunate rival.

He gritted his teeth, his breath came hot and panting, and he commenced to feel of a "slung-shot," which he had concealed in an inside pocket of his coat.

He was skilled in the use of this weapon, which, in his hands, was perhaps even more effective than a pistol or a dagger would have been.

Unconscious of his hidden foe being so near him, Tibbits placed himself at the head of his company, and gave the word for them to march.

The boys did their best, for they knew Fanny was watching them from the stoop, and they kept beautiful time, as, with shouldered muskets, they moved on, the band striking up: "The Girl I Left Behind Me."

Fanny waved her white handkerchief to Ned, and now and then, looking back, he smiled and nodded to her.

After half an hour's marching the company reached a level piece of ground, near a deep wood, where they halted.

The target was soon put in position.

The distance for shooting was sixty yards.

Tim Burger had the first three shots. He was one of the best men of the Liberties, and was a good hand at making preserve cans in the can-factory where he worked; but when it came to shooting, Tim was nowhere.

The boys laughed to see how wide the shots flew of the mark. His third shot just tipped the edge of the target, at which there was a rousing cheer and much amusement.

Tom Loper next toed the mark. He brought the barrel of his gun down upon the palm of his hand in a way which would have made you think he was going to do great things.

Bang! went the piece, and Honey, who stood fully six feet away from the target, on one side of it, was seen to bound up and then fall upon his back, his belly rolling from side to side.

"Halloo!" cried Loper, in dismay, "hope I didn't hit him."

"He's shot, and no mistake about it!" cried Tibbits, running up to the negro, followed by the others.

But the moment they reached the darky's side, they discovered that he was in strong convulsions of laughter.

He arose as soon as his mirth would permit him, and pointed to his hat, through which Loper's bullet had, in fact, made a clean hole, just grazing the top of the negro's head.

"A narrow escape, Honey," said Tibbits. "You wouldn't have laughed had the bullet struck half an inch lower."

Loper did better next time, his bullet striking within three inches of the mark.

The third shot was worse than the first, the bullet going up and cutting off a branch from the top of a tree some distance off.

And now it was Bill Walsh's turn.

Bill didn't say a word. He made no flourish at all with his piece, but his keen eyes glittered like diamonds as they were turned towards the target.

Up went the gun quickly, and the sharp report followed.

Then there was a white spot where a piece had been chipped off the target within an inch of the bull's-eye.

"How's that, boys!" said Bill; "hope to do better next time."

His second shot, however, struck in nearly the same place; but the third was plumped squarely into the bull's-eye.

There was a cheer as Bill resigned his place to the next man.

Tibbits was the last to fire.

Now, you can bet there was no shilly-shallying in anything Ned undertook. When he had anything to do, no matter what, he believed in getting himself in trim to do it the best way—that was Ned all over.

He just lifted his piece, took quick but steady aim, and then fired.

Honey gave a shout, ran to the target and laid his finger on the hole directly in the center of the bull's eye, which the well-aimed bullet had made.

Ned's second shot was not quite so good a one, but his third again struck the bull's-eye.

The boys all cheered, but Ned did not seem in the least elated by his success.

That was his way.

He thought enough of himself to know his own merits, but he was nothing of a blower.

"You'll win the prize, Tibbits, if you keep on as you've commenced," said Bill Walsh.

And he was right, too.

Tibbits, when the shoot was over, was found to have scored fifteen bull's-eyes—eight more than the next best shot.

"Now, boys," said Ned, "before we start for home I'll just go and see granddad, and you can wait here until I come back."

This grandfather of Ned's was an old man, who lived on the other side of the woods all alone in a little house he owned.

The young foreman sometimes visited him, as the old man liked to see him and talk to him now and then.

"All right, Ned."

"Take care of yourself, Ned," and other remarks were made as he left the company, for he was so great a favorite with his men that they missed him much, even when he was away from them for only a few minutes.

Moving briskly along the narrow path leading through the very heart of the woods, Ned was passing a line of trees on the edge of a deep gully, when all at once, as he chanced to turn his head to look at a large, curious bird which had alighted on a twig near him, something went past his eyes with a whizzing sound, just grazing his forehead.

There was nothing of the dummy about Ned.

He did not stand and look about him, but he sprang quickly toward the place whence the thing had been hurled.

There, behind one of the trees, was the figure of a man, with a piece of black crepe over his face.

"Hallo!" cried Ned, "what's up? What have you been trying to do, and who are you?"

Before he could seize the fellow the latter drew off with a slungshot he held, and which Tibbits now knew was the

instrument, which, owing to his turning his head, had previously so narrowly missed him, and endeavored to strike him with it on the temple.

But Ned was too quick for him.

He caught the weapon by the string before it could do any mischief, and jerked it from the man's hand.

In an instant the fellow grappled with him, and together the two rolled down the side of the gully to the bottom of it.

Through the gully ran a deep stream.

Ned's opponent being uppermost, as their two bodies struck some low bushes near the edge of it, the fellow threw himself across the foreman's stomach, and, with both hands, quickly seizing him by the hair, jerked his head down under the water.

There he endeavored to hold it long enough for his antagonist to suffocate.

He was a very strong man, and Tibbits was in a disadvantageous position.

The young fireman struggled to free himself, but in vain.

The gurgling noise he made with his mouth under water seemed to afford the other person the most intense satisfaction. Through the holes in the piece of black crepe his evil eyes glowed like those of some demon, and as the struggles of his intended victim became weaker and weaker, a horrid hiss sounded between his clenched teeth.

"At last—at last!" he muttered.

CHAPTER VII.

MISSING.

"Tell you what, boys, Tibbits is making a long stay of it," remarked Bill Walsh, when two hours had passed, and there was no sign of their returning foreman.

"So he is," said Loper, "but his granddad likes to talk with him, and he seems to enjoy his company. I suppose Tibbits doesn't like to leave him just yet."

"He's right enough there," said Tim Burger, "and I'm not the boy to growl at his staying."

But when another hour passed, and still Ned did not return, Bill Walsh, who had been reclining on the ground, sprang to his feet.

"Boys, this thing has gone far enough," he said. "Ned wouldn't stay away so long if he could help it. I'm going to his granddad's to see, if I can, what's up."

"I'll go with you," said Tom Loper.

They both started, and half an hour later they reached the little house where Ned's grandfather lived.

The old man came to the door when they knocked, and from him they learned that young Tibbits had not been there that day.

Bill looked at Loper.

The two shook their heads.

"Something has gone wrong," whispered Walsh.

"Perhaps he's come back while we've been away," said Loper.

The young men took leave of Ned's grandfather and returned to their comrades.

But Ned had not yet arrived.

"Come, now, this thing is played out," said Bill. "Let's all scour the woods for him."

The woods were searched, but no sign of the missing young foreman could be found.

The boys were almost wild about it.

The loss of Tibbits was like a death-blow to them.

Some of them shed tears.

But they were obliged to return to the engine-house without their missing man.

Fanny Loper was on the front stoop as the company passed her house.

Her roving black eyes looked in vain for Tibbits.

"Halt!" cried Bill Walsh, who now commanded the company.

Fanny was struck by the dejected looks of all that something serious had happened.

She ran down the front steps to meet her brother, who now advanced from the ranks and approached her.

"Where's Mr. Tibbits, Tom?" said Fanny.

"Don't ask me," said Tom, sadly.

"He is dead!" screamed Fanny. "I see it in your face."

"I don't think he's dead," said Tom. "The truth is, Fanny, we don't know what has become of him."

Now, Fanny was not one of your fainting sort of girls.

The way she moved her quivering head and looked at Tom with her black, sparkling eyes, was enough to put spirit in the heart of the most morose and over-wrought.

"Not dead, or I wouldn't have come back without him!" she cried, her organ-like voice striking to the very soul of every man.

"We couldn't help it, Fanny. We scoured the woods for him, but it was no use."

"And you have given up looking for him," said Fanny.

"Not a bit of it. We are going to look again, and we'll look till we find him, dead or alive. There's not a man of us will rest till we find out something about our bully foreman—eh, boys?" he added, turning to the company.

"You bet, Tom!" came the cry.

Fanny went into the house. Loper rejoined the company, and they marched on.

At last they reached the engine-house, where, for some time, they talked over Ned's strange disappearance, and formed plans for searching for him again that very night.

When Loper returned home at dark he found his sister dressed for going out.

"Where are you bound to, Fanny?" he inquired.

She was very pale, and there was a wild look in her dark eyes as she answered:

"I am going to look for Ned, and I want you to go with me."

"Better stay at home, sis," said Tom. "The boys are to hunt for him again to-night."

"The more the better," said Fanny. "We can all separate and look in different directions. Oh, Tom!" she sobbed, the tears suddenly gushing from her eyes like rain, "what do you really think has become of him?"

"Don't know; but keep up your heart, sis. Time enough to cry if we find him dead."

Tom partook of a light supper, and then he and Fanny started for the woods, for he had been unable to persuade his anxious sister to remain at home. He carried a lantern in one hand, but it was not needed until they should reach the forest, as a full, unclouded moon was shining at the time.

"Shall we wait here for the boys?" inquired the young man, when they arrived at the edge of the woods.

"No," said Fanny, "let us commence our search at once."

Tom, followed by his sister, entered the woods and moved along the path which Ned had pursued when he left the company.

Fanny's keen eyes roved from right to left.

A woman, on an occasion of this kind, will often see things which would escape the notice of a man.

The two had not proceeded far when Fanny suddenly pointed out to Tom the trampled appearance of the grass by the

tree behind which Ned's intended assassin had been concealed.

"Right enough, sis!" cried Tom.

He held his lantern near the ground, and then both the young people could perceive that the grass bore the same trampled look all the way down to the stream as it did on the edge of the gully.

Loper descended into the gully, still followed by his sister.

The two noticed that on the bank of the stream the ground bore the traces of a violent struggle.

"Fanny," said Tom, solemnly, "you can bet your life there has been foul play here!"

The young girl's heart beat loud and fast.

"Oh, Tom!" she gasped, "tell me just what you think about it!"

"I think there has been a tussle here between Ned and some other man or men. The roughs of Plattsville often come to these woods. In fact, I've heard that they have a concealed rendezvous here somewhere, where they meet once in a while to plan mischief. They're a hard set, Fan, and if any of them had happened to fall in with Tibbits alone in the woods, there's no telling what might have happened, as they're a crowd that favor Baldy and his gang."

"If they have harmed Ned!" cried Fanny, with flashing eyes, "I'll hunt the earth from one end to the other but I'll find out the guilty party!"

"That's the sort, Fan," said Tom. "But keep cool. Nothing like that when you're on the scent."

Tom now discovered with his lantern certain marks upon the ground as if a body had been dragged along. His heart misgave him at the sight, for it led him almost to the conclusion that Tibbits had been killed.

As he followed the trail, however, and saw no blood, he had a faint hope that things were not quite so bad as he had imagined.

The trail led him and Fanny along the bank of the stream, and finally out of the gully.

After following it a long distance, the two suddenly lost sight of it near an old well in the very heart of the woods, and which had once belonged to a stone house, only the ruins of which now remained.

These ruins consisted merely of a heap of moss-covered stones, filling a sort of pit, which seemed to have once been the cellar of the house.

Fanny and her brother now exchanged glances.

She trembled from head to foot, as she looked significantly into the well.

But it was too dark there, and she could see nothing.

"Now, Fan," said Tom, "it's my opinion that you're going to be tried pretty hard. Don't faint, sis."

"I understand!" gasped Fanny. "You think Ned's body is down in that well?"

"I'm afraid so, and that's just what's the matter."

The young girl uttered a cry of agony, and Tom could hear the loud beating of her heart.

"I'm going down into the well to see," continued Tom.

As he spoke he secured the lantern to his white belt, which he had not yet taken off, and climbed over the edge of the well. The stones around the sides of the pit protruded sufficiently to afford him a good hold, and he commenced the descent.

"Do you see anything?" called Fanny, when he was about twelve feet below her.

"Nothing but water," he answered. "But I have not got far enough yet."

On he went.

All at once there was a crash, as a heavy stone struck his lantern and extinguished it.

Then Fanny heard him utter a strange cry, which was followed by a splash, after which all was still.

So deep was the gloom in the pit that she could not even guess what had happened.

"Tom—Tom! Where are you?" she called.

There was no response.

"Oh, what can be the matter?" she cried. "I am afraid he has fallen into the well."

Now she saw lanterns in the distance, and she knew that the other members of the Liberty were coming on the search.

She made her way toward them, and the first man she met was Bill Walsh.

She explained what had happened.

"This way, boys!" called Bill.

They all came as soon as possible, and, accompanied by the anxious girl, they made their way to the well.

Bill threw off his coat.

"If there's anyone, or any dead body, down in that well, I'm going to spot it," he said.

With one of the lanterns secured to his belt, he descended to the water.

He peered into it, but he could see nothing in it.

The water was not, apparently, very deep, but in the shallow bottom there was a slanting hole, into which a man's body might sink, and from which it might not again reappear.

"Boys!" shouted Bill.

"Hallo!" came from above.

"Cut me a long pole and pitch it down to me!"

The pole was cut—the long, slender trunk of a sapling serving the purpose.

It was carefully dropped down to Bill, twenty feet below. He seized it by one end and thrust the other into the black hole he saw under the water.

The hole took a slanting direction.

Bill felt carefully about with the pole, but he touched nothing but stones and soft earth.

At last he returned to the top of the well, no wiser than when he went down.

"Tell you what, boys, I don't know what to think!" he cried. "According to what's happened, it would seem as if the bodies of two of our members—Tibbits and Loper—must be down there; but if they are, they've either sunk in the soft ground, or got wedged somehow in the hollow in the bottom. I couldn't feel either of them with the pole."

"Let's hope that they are not there," said Tim Burger.

"But I feel sure my brother must have fallen into the well," said the agonized Fanny Loper. "What else could have become of him?"

"It's too bad, Miss Loper," said Walsh. "But the only thing to do now is to have the bottom of the well carefully dragged by men who understand their business."

All the boys felt deeply for Fanny, who was almost wild with distress.

Both lover and brother lost on the same day! It was indeed terrible!

Sadly the weeping, sobbing girl left the woods, and went to carry the dreadful news to her mother.

Fanny was a brave girl, as we have said, but the events which had lately happened were too much for the firmest of her sex to withstand, and before the next night she lay tossing upon her couch in delirium, raving about Tibbits and her brother.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE SECRET RENDEZVOUS.

As said in a previous chapter, the struggles of Ned Tibbits, while his head was held under the water of the stream by his assailant, soon became very feeble.

The brave young foreman had done his best to free himself from his opponent's grasp.

Accident, however, had given the other the advantage of position, of which he seemed determined to avail himself.

Ned felt that he was strangling. The water rushed into his mouth and nostrils, a dark mist seemed to gather before his vision, and he finally became unconscious.

At that moment the man who held him was seized by strong hands, and pulled away from his intended victim, who was then raised from the water.

"I'm afraid he's gone!" said one of the persons who had hauled Tibbits from the stream.

The form of the foreman was placed upon the ground, where it lay limp and motionless.

"Baldy, my boy, yer've got yerself into trouble!" continued the speaker—a young rough, with lowering brow and a hardened expression of countenance. "Come; yer may as well take that piece of black crepe off yer face, for I and all the rest of us knowed yer from the first!"

Baldy, who had turned aside his head, and who seemed to be meditating a retreat, shuddered as the man laid a hand on his shoulder.

"How did yer know it was me?" he inquired fiercely, now facing the person who had addressed him, and removing his piece of crepe.

"The other laughed hoarsely.

"What d'yer take me for?" he said. "I'd know yer in the biggest crowd that ever was!"

Baldy now looked at the pale face and still form of Tibbits on the ground.

The eyes of all the roughs, who numbered about twenty of the worst characters in Plattsville, were turned toward him.

He became ghastly, a tremor shook his frame, and drops of perspiration came out on his brow.

"Do yer think he's dead? Come, now, I'd like for to know, as I didn't want to kill him. I on'y wanted to scare him a bit."

To tell the truth, he was much frightened at having been discovered in the perpetration of so foul a crime.

"What made yer do it, Baldy? I didn't think you was such a fool," said Waxey.

"Didn't I tell yer it was an accident?" replied Baldy.

At this there was a laugh from the gang.

Waxey stooped and laid a hand on Ned's breast over the heart.

"Tell yer what it is, boys," he then said, "I don't think he's dead, after all; his heart beats a little!"

Baldy breathed a heavy sigh of relief.

"I tell yer what we'd better do," continued Waxey. "I believe there's money for us in this thing!"

He went about among his companions, whispering something to them.

Whatever it was, it received the approval of all, even of Baldy.

A few minutes later the senseless form was lifted by a few of the men and borne along through the woods, Baldy and some of the others acting as scouts, to watch that no stranger or other unwelcome person should discover the party.

Swiftly through the woods they passed, and at last they reached the ruins of the stone house near the well.

Waxey then motioned to some of the gang, who at once went to work, removing large stones from what seemed to have been once the area of a house, with its brick steps leading into the cellar.

A sufficient number of stones having been removed, an opening was revealed at the foot of the steps.

It was just large enough for a man to pass through. It led

into a bricked passage, which sloped downward into a vault under what had once been the cellar.

For what purpose, or when and by whom this vault had been constructed, the Smashers' friends could not tell.

Waxey had discovered it by chance, one day, when he was out gunning in the woods.

A rabbit which he had shot and wounded took refuge among the stones in the area, and in pulling them away the young man saw the opening at the foot of the steps. Passing through it he soon came upon the vault, which was about twelve by fifteen feet in size, and walled with cemented stone.

He lost no time in making his discovery known to his friends—other roughs, who were some of the hardest boys in the town, and they resolved to use the vault for a secret retreat—a sort of rendezvous to which they could repair at any time.

The apartment contained a few chairs, a pine table, and an old rusty lounge.

Upon the latter Tibbits' bearers laid the senseless form of the young foreman.

Meanwhile, a few of the gang piled up against the opening the stones they had removed, so as to conceal the entrance to the retreat.

Waxey now took matches from his pocket, went to a corner of the ranch, and the next moment the apartment was lighted by a candle in a black bottle.

Just then Tibbits was seen to slowly open his eyes, while a faint color tinged his cheeks.

"He is coming to!" cried Baldy.

All the roughs approached Ned, who, a moment later, had raised himself on his elbow, and was gazing about him in a bewildered manner.

"Where am I?" were his first words.

"Don't you wish we'd tell yer—eh?" cried Waxey, leering into his face.

Tibbits bowed his head upon his hands, and struggled with his confused brain.

Gradually past events forced themselves upon his mind.

He remembered his struggle by the stream, with his head under the water.

He looked at Baldy.

"You were the man who tried to smother me by holding my head beneath the surface of the stream."

"No," broke in Waxey, "Baldy didn't do it! Some feller—we don't know who he was, as he ran away when he saw us coming—had your head down under the water. You were senseless when we pulled you out, and so we thought it best to bring yer here."

Ned glanced around him and comprehended the truth.

He was in the secret rendezvous of the Smashers and their friends.

"Why did you bring me here?" he said. "Why didn't you take me to my friends? They were not far off."

As he spoke he staggered to his feet.

"I will leave this place and go to them now," he continued, moving toward a door which opened upon the passageway leading to the outside entrance.

"No, yer don't," said Waxey, placing himself before him. "Do yer think we're goin' to let yer leave us in that way, after the trouble we've had in bringing you here?"

Others of the gang placed themselves before Ned, who at once perceived the uselessness of resistance.

"What are you going to do with me?" he inquired. "Remember there is such a thing as law, even in the out-of-the-way places of Plattsville."

"We ain't a-goin' to hurt ye," said Waxey. "At the same time, you ain't a-goin' ter leave this place in a hurry; so ye may as well sit down again!"

The foreman was still faint and dizzy from the late ordeal through which he had just passed.

As he seated himself on the lounge, a feeling of drowsiness stole over him, and, in spite of his efforts to the contrary, he soon fell into a deep sleep.

Hours passed, and still he slept.

Meanwhile, the roughs had been holding a consultation.

"Hark!" he said. "D'ye hear nothin'?"

"I thought I heard a woman's voice," answered Baldy.

"It comes from the top of the well," said Waxey. "Come, boys, let's see what's up!"

As he spoke, he darted through an opening at one side of the vault, and on his hands and knees, followed by several of his gang, he crept along a narrow passage.

This passage led to the left side of the well, about twelve feet below the top. There the pieces of rock with which the well was stoned were loosened. In fact, they partially hid an opening there large enough to admit a human body.

As Waxey removed, by pulling them inward, the stones which loosely filled the aperture, a gleam of light flashed into his eyes.

It came from the lantern fastened to Tom's belt, while, as previously stated, he was descending into the well.

"Who is it?" whispered one of Waxey's companions.

"It's Tom Loper—one of them Liberties," answered Waxey.

"I got a glimpse of him when I looked up from the hole. He and his sister—for she is above there—I jist heard her speak—seem to think that Ned's body is at the bottom of the well, and he's goin' to look for it."

"Better stop up the hole, or he'll discover our hiding-place," said the other.

"That's jist what I'm goin' to do!"

But, even as he spoke, Loper descended so quickly that he arrived opposite to the hole, and, to his surprise, beheld the crouching figure of Waxey within the aperture.

Before he could cry out Waxey, promptly picking up a stone, hurled it at the lantern, which it struck, smashing and extinguishing it in a moment.

Then the rough, seizing Loper by the collar, jerked him into the passage.

"Don't let us have any chin-music," cried Waxey. "Stop up his mouth and hold him—some of you!"

Several of the gang dragged Loper forward toward the vault, while another placed his hand over his mouth to stifle his cries.

As soon as Waxey had stopped up the aperture in the side of the well with the stone he had displaced, he made his way to the vault.

Loper, now on his feet, was surrounded by the gang.

All at once, as one of them stood aside, he beheld his foreman quietly asleep on the lounge.

"Ned Tibbits!" he cried, joyfully. "Alive, thank God! Where did you find him? How came he here?" added Loper, turning toward his captors.

"I daresay you'd like for to know," sneered Baldy. "We've got you both in a trap from which we won't let you go in a hurry!"

"It'll be the worst for you if you don't," said Loper. "If I had three of our Liberties here I'd fight my way out of here in spite of you all!"

"Stop yer' blowing," said Baldy. "You Liberties are all gas, anyhow! You're a pack of cowards!"

"You lie!" cried Loper, unable to control his indignation, "and the thrashing you and your men got the other day proves it!"

At this Baldy hauled off and struck Loper upon the jaw.

The young man returned the blow. Then he and Baldy closed in a rough-and-tumble fight.

As previously stated, the foreman of the Smashers was very strong.

He contrived to throw Loper and to fall on top of him.

But Tom, as limber as an eel, wriggled and struggled, so that he would soon have got uppermost, had it not been for one of the roughs, who pulled him back. This enabled Baldy to get both knees upon Loper's breast, and to twist a hand in his hair, by which latter he held his head down on the floor of the vault, while he proceeded to pummel him unmercifully with his fist.

His blows were like those of a sledge-hammer.

With ugly thuds they struck the prostrate young man, from whose mouth and nostrils the blood began to flow.

"How about your Liberties now, eh?" cried Baldy. "Come, what about yer coward company, now?"

Loper struggled in vain to release himself.

His face would have been beaten to a jelly had it not been for a sudden interruption.

CHAPTER IX.

THE FIGHT.

The interruption was caused by Tibbits.

Awakened by the half-suppressed cries of the spectators of the combat, the young foreman arose to a sitting posture, and rubbed his eyes.

His gaze then fell upon Tom Loper prostrate on the floor, with Baldy inflicting upon him those sledge-hammer blows with his fist.

In an instant Ned, angry and surprised, was on his feet. He rushed up to Baldy and pushed him off his friend.

"Let him up!" he said, sternly.

One of the gang now endeavored to seize Tibbits, but the latter at once knocked him down.

Meanwhile, Baldy had sprung to his feet and confronted him.

"A pretty crowd you are!" cried Ned. "I suppose Loper and I'll have the whole pack of you on us now, you wretched sneaks!"

His wrathful gaze was fixed on Baldy, who drew back a few steps, as if to be on his guard.

Tom Loper, his face covered with blood, had arisen and taken his place at Ned's side.

"Ned," said he, "I'm with you, whatever you are going to do."

"Of course, we can't do anything against such a crowd," said Tibbits.

Waxey viciously rolled in his cheek the cud of tobacco he was chewing.

"See here now," he said. "What do yer mean to imply, Tibbits? Yer don't mean to say that our crowd thinks we'll have to make a stand agin two sech mokes as you are?"

"That's just what I mean!" answered Ned.

"Who do yer think is afraid of yer—s-a-a-y?" cried Waxey, advancing close to the young foreman with doubled fists. "Any one of this gang could whip two sech bummers as you and Loper."

"Better try it and see," said Ned.

"I could 'put a head' on yer myself," said Waxey.

"Could you?" said Tibbits, quietly elevating his eyebrows. "I'd like to see you do it."

"I could do it in quick time if I wanted to," growled Waxey.

"I don't believe it," said Ned.

"You don't, eh? Come, now, I'll make an agreement with

yer. I'll fight yer square and fair, and if I don't whip yer, you can have yer freedom from this 'ere place."

"Provided Tom Loper whips me, too," put in Baldy. "He and I ain't through yet, by a long shot!"

"Yes," said Waxey, "provided I don't whip Tibbits and you don't whip Loper, they are both free from this 'ere place."

"It must be fair and square," said Tibbits. "There must be no interference."

"Do yer hear that, boys?" cried Waxey, turning to his crowd. "None of yer must interfere."

"All right, Waxey!" "That's the sort!" "We won't!" and similar cries were heard.

Waxey threw off his coat, buckled a belt he wore more tightly about his waist, and rolled up his shirt sleeves above the elbow, displaying a pair of arms like those of a blacksmith.

This person, whom all the roughs in the village recognized as their leader, or captain, had been a professional pugilist.

He bore upon his visage the marks of injuries he had received in many a desperate fist fight.

Upon his forehead and upon both of his cheek-bones there were livid scars which time would never heal.

His friends said that one of his ribs had been stove in, and that he bore the marks of knuckles on the flesh of his left breast.

In person this man was very broad for his height, which was only five feet eight. His full face, bull neck, and bright, keen eyes indicated that he was possessed of much vitality.

His shoulders were square, his arms long, and his breast stood out full and deep, and his voice had that tone between bass and treble which betokens great strength and power of the lungs.

He was, in fact, a man of great strength, while the tapering of his hips downward showed that he was not deficient in agility.

"Let Loper and I have the first mill," said Baldy. "We won't be long. I'll soon settle him."

"All right," said Waxey, sitting down on the lounge.

As Baldy and Loper met, the former struck out a powerful blow. But his opponent parried it, and at the same time dealt him a peeler between the eyes.

Baldy staggered like a bull, and, rushing in, endeavored to close with his opponent.

But Loper's previous experience made him wary, and he resolved, if possible, to keep his antagonist at arms'-length.

He was an active young fellow, and he danced about his enraged opponent, putting in his blows with great rapidity and effect.

Baldy soon found himself nearly blinded, and being now unable to see his antagonist, he cried out:

"Enough!"

"Well," said Waxey, "it was a square fight, and I ain't got nothin' to say. As Baldy's been whipped—he's been whipped, that's all. Come, Tibbits, if you're ready."

"All ready!" promptly answered Tibbits, and he put himself in position as he spoke.

"Look out! I'm goin' fur yer!" cried Waxey, as he made a feint.

Tibbits never budged.

Waxey whirled around on his heel as he again came into position.

"Now, then, look out fur yer pepper-box—won't yer—s-a-a-y!" cried Waxey, as he aimed a straight, quick blow at Ned's mouth.

Down went Ned's head, under the other's arm, and up went his right fist against his chin, knocking his teeth together with a click.

Waxey parried a second blow, and then drove in a right-hander for Ned's left eye.

Tibbits parried this blow with one arm, his other went straight out, and Waxey now caught it on the nose.

By this time he had ceased to smile.

Respect for his antagonist made him more sober and wary. A few more blows were given and returned, when, feeling confident of his strength, Waxey closed in for a rough-and-tumble.

Blow after blow was given and received, but the hard skin of Waxey did not show punishment so much as that of Tibbits.

"A few more, Waxey, and you'll have him!" cried one of the pugilist's friends. "He's pretty well blown already!"

In fact, Tibbits was nearly exhausted, although he struggled manfully against the feeling.

"May as well cave in now," said Waxey, as he drove in two heavy blows on Ned's forehead.

In an instant the young foreman saw a chance for a favorable blow.

Hauling off, he sent in his left heavily between the eyes of his opponent, who was, for a moment, staggered by so heavy and unexpected a blow.

Tibbits was not the boy to miss following up an advantage under such circumstances.

His blows were rained in so rapidly that Waxey suffered terrible punishment ere he could recover from the sort of "daze" into which he had been thrown.

At last Tibbits saw an opportunity for his favorite chin-music trick.

He sprang upon Waxey, pulled back his head, and his fist crashed up against the man's chin.

Gasping for breath, Waxey held up a hand as a sign that he was vanquished, while a half audible "enough!" came from between his swollen lips.

Then the young foreman, who, to tell the truth, was so exhausted that he could not have fought a minute longer, sat down on the lounge.

Loper came up and shook hands with him.

"My fight was a hard one, Ned," he said, "but yours was still harder. We have earned our liberty, I suppose?"

Tibbits arose from the lounge.

"Well," he said to Waxey, "I believe we are free to go now. Will you tell your men to show us the way-out?"

"No, sir; yer don't leave this place in a hurry," answered Waxey.

"You promised to set us at liberty if we whipped you and Baldy. Do you mean to go back on your word?"

"Circumstances alter cases," answered Waxey. "I've changed my mind, and that's all there is about it. Them that gits in this hole don't git out so easy."

"Pshaw!" cried Ned, scornfully, "I might have known how things would turn out."

He and Tom Loper sat down on the lounge.

"Got a cigar?" inquired the foreman of his friend.

"No, but I have a pipe, and I have some tobacco."

He took the pipe from his pocket, filled it, and presented it to Ned.

The young man lighted it, and sat puffing as unconcernedly as if he were in his own engine-house.

That was Tibbits' way.

Whenever he got into any trouble from which he could not extricate himself he was cool and composed—never in a flurry.

But, oh, wasn't it a cut to the roughs to see Waxey—the man upon whom they had placed so much dependence—so badly beaten by the Liberties' plucky foreman.

"Tell you what, fellers, there's a smart boy for you—no

nonsense about him," whispered one of the gang to a companion, as he looked over toward Ned.

"Right," answered the other, "but I guess we'll take some of the spirit out of him before he leaves this place."

CHAPTER X.

DISGUISED.

A week passed, during which the Liberties, who were looking for Ned, could find no sign of him, either dead or living.

The well had been dragged, but it was ascertained that there was nobody there.

Fanny Loper was still suffering deep anguish on account of her missing lover and her brother.

Bill Walsh called occasionally to report the fruitless result of every search that was made.

"What can have become of him?" Fanny would say, clasping her hands.

"Don't know," Bill would answer, "but we boys have all sworn not to rest until we come upon some clew."

Occasionally they met in the engine-house, but the absence of the light and soul of the company, Ned Tibbits, had cast a gloomy look on the faces of all the men.

One evening, as they sat thus, conversing in low voices, they were surprised by the entrance of a strange-looking person.

He was an old man, apparently about seventy, wearing a snuff-colored coat and a high hat battered out of all shape, from under which his white hair fell in disheveled masses.

He walked with trembling steps, and supported himself a little with a thick cane.

None of the company had ever before seen this old man.

"Take a seat and rest yourself, sir," said Bill, bringing him a chair.

He sat down.

"This is Mr. Tibbits' company, is it not?" he inquired.

"Yes, sir," answered Bill, looking keenly at the stranger.

The eyes of all of the company present were turned eagerly upon the old man.

"And my name is Jenkins," he said.

"Well, go on, Mr. Jenkins," said Bill. "If you have any news of our Ned, just let us hear it, for we are the boys to be glad of it, I can tell you."

"You would like to know what has become of Mr. Tibbits?" said the old man.

"Just so—that we would, you can believe," said Bill.

"How much will you give me to bring him to you, safe and sound?"

"You mean to say that Ned Tibbits is safe and well?" cried Walsh.

"He is well, but not safe. He is in the hands of people who mean to kill him before to-morrow morning."

"Do you mean that?" cried Bill, much alarmed.

"Yes. He will certainly die before to-morrow morning, unless you give me a chance to effect his release."

Bill looked around at his companions.

Then he again sharply scrutinized the speaker.

"Come, now," he said, "there is no 'gammon' about what you tell us—eh?"

"It is true," said the old man.

"Then why can you not let us know at once where he is, that we may go there and rescue him?"

"I cannot do that," was the reply.

"Why not?"

"They would kill me if I did."

"But you say that if we give you money enough you will bring him to us."

"Yes, I will send him to you."

"Would not you be killed for doing that?"

"No; for I would give all the money, except a slight reservation, to the people who have him in their hands. Give me one thousand dollars, and your foreman shall be sent to you safe and sound. He will tell his story when he reaches you."

Now, it struck Bill, as well as the rest of the boys, that this was a "sort of game." He suddenly laid his hand on the old man's shoulder.

"Come, now, I'll bet you are one of the very people you speak of as having Tibbits in their power," he cried.

"You are mistaken," was the reply. "I am a hermit. I live in a cave about fifteen miles from here, to which I have lately moved. The people of whom I speak came to me yesterday, and told me that they wanted me to do an errand for them. I could perceive that they were bad characters, and that they would give me no peace unless I complied with their wishes. They sent me on the errand I have just explained to you."

"You should have gone to the police about it."

"I was afraid of my life. They would have found it out, and have killed me."

"We don't want to call you hard names," said Bill, "but how do we know that what you, a stranger, tell us is true?"

"I have a guarantee here," said the old man, pulling a piece of paper from his pocket.

Bill took the paper and read upon it these lines:

"What the bearer says is true. I am in the hands of people who threaten to take my life before to-morrow morning, unless one thousand dollars be paid for my release. The Liberties will please pay the money, and I will refund it after I rejoin them.
Ned Tibbits."

Bill Walsh closely scrutinized the writing. Then he passed the paper around among the company.

"It is Ned's writing." "No mistake about that," etc., were heard on all sides.

Bill reflected.

He was none of your quick, nervous ones to do anything in a hurry. He always thought a little, under circumstances like the present, before acting.

Meanwhile, you can believe he didn't take his eyes off the old man.

"We were going to offer a reward of five hundred in the newspapers," he finally said.

"I don't think they would be satisfied with that," said Jenkins. "They want a thousand."

"That's more'n we can afford," said Bill, coolly.

"More than you can afford to save the precious life of your foreman?" cried the old man, in surprise.

"Yes," said Bill, unmoved.

Jenkins arose.

"Then I will tell the people who sent me on this errand what you say."

Bill Walsh nodded.

"Good-night," said Jenkins.

"Good-night," returned all the company in chorus.

They could see at once that Bill was up to something, but what it was they couldn't tell.

"Now, boys," said Walsh, as soon as the old man was gone, "there's something for us to do to-night. We must follow that fellow without his knowing it. He is not what he seems to be. You may make up your minds that he is trying to play us a trick."

"Yes, I believe we all think so," said one of the others. "It will not be hard to follow an old fellow like that."

"Harder than you think," answered Bill. "He is not quite so old as he looks. Did you notice his teeth?"

"No."

"Well, they were as even and sound as mine. Then, again, his cheeks were a little too smooth and plump for a person of his age."

"Ho—ho! that looks suspicious."

"It is so suspicious," answered Walsh, "that I wouldn't be afraid to bet that the fellow isn't any older than I am."

"You think he is disguised like an old man?"

"I do; but come, boys, we must lose no time. I will follow him, and the rest of you keep me in sight."

Bill then left the engine-house, moving along in the shadow of a high fence, towards the retreating form of Jenkins, which he could make out in the distance.

The moon was obscured by clouds on this night, so that he had but little light to assist him.

All at once the old man disappeared behind a hedge.

Bill kept on, but he could see nothing of the person he was looking for.

All at once, however, he fancied he saw a figure seated on a stone wall directly ahead of him.

As he approached it, there was light enough for him to perceive that this was not an old man.

He was a young fellow whom Walsh recognized, in spite of the obscurity, as Andy Jackman, one of the worst roughs of the town.

"Hallo, Bill! Where yer bound?" he inquired.

"Nowhere—at least, nowhere in particular; I am going home," answered Bill.

"Oh!" said Andy.

Bill kept on, moving briskly along until he had passed a hedge, when he struck into a path which would lead him around to the spot where Andy was seated.

That Andy and the old man who had come to the engine-house were one and the same person he did not doubt.

In this surmise he was correct.

The moment Bill was out of sight, Andy jumped down from the stone wall, and picking up a bundle—the disguise he had worn—he hurried along a path leading to the woods.

Reaching there, he plunged into its depths and kept on, now and then looking behind him, as if to make sure that he was not watched.

At last he reached the area near the ruins containing the stones, which he proceeded to displace.

Thus gaining entrance to the narrow passage leading into the vault, he replaced some of the stones, after which he passed on.

He entered the vault, where were assembled all of the gang, who made it their rendezvous.

On the old lounge, tied hand and foot, were Ned Tibbits and Tom Loper.

Both looked thinner than when they were first brought there.

The deprivation of fresh air and a proper quantity of food—for they were here allowed nothing but bread and water—had not failed to have some effect upon them.

Tibbits' constitution was one of iron, but even he would have now owned that he had lost some strength.

"Well?" said Waxey, as Andy entered, "how did yer make out?"

"Not very well. The mokes wouldn't plank down the rhino even for Tibbits."

"Oh, what a set!" cried Waxey. "Wouldn't give it even to save their foreman's life."

"No. The fact is, though, I think they may have suspected

there was humbug in the matter. You have well imitated Tibbits' writing in the note you sent, but I don't think they believed it was genuine."

"You didn't let any of 'em foller yer, I hope?" said Waxey.

"No."

And he described how Bill Walsh had passed him as he sat on the stone wall.

"Well done," said Waxey.

Then he drew Baldy, the Smashers' foreman, who was present, to one side.

"You say you are sure you can git the 'soap'?" he said to this man.

"I am sure of it," answered Baldy. "I will pay it to you after you have done the deed, and we can clear out, and never trouble Plattsville again."

"That's so. Well, six hundred dollars is better than five. A larger reward than five hundred might be offered in time, but we can't keep them prisoners too long, as the police, the moment the affair is put in their hands, may scent out our rendezvous and come here. It would go hard with us if they should."

"Yes, it would," said Baldy.

"Well, I will do what you wish," said Waxey, "although I must own it kind of goes agin me to do it, as I never committed murder afore."

"Better do it at once," said Baldy, "and get through with it as soon as you can."

"I wish the Liberties had forked down the thousand. I would have liked that better," said Waxey.

"As they didn't fork it down," said Baldy, "you cannot do better than to close with my offer of six hundred."

"I'll do it, as I said," replied Waxey, "but if you are not up to yer word—look out for yerself," he added, in a terrible voice.

"You needn't be afraid. I shall keep my word, if only for once in my life."

"Where did you say the money is?" inquired Waxey.

"At my lodgings. I sold the lots for my uncle day before yesterday, for six hundred. He is waiting in New York City for me to send him the money, but he'll have to wait a long time."

"And after I do the deed, you will go with me to your lodgings and give me the money?"

"Yes; but why all this waste of words? You saw me sell the lots and receive the cash yourself. You know I have it."

"Enough!" said Waxey. "Only mind yer don't try in any way to do me out of the money."

"Never fear."

Waxey then advanced toward the Liberties' foreman.

"Ned Tibbits, yer time has come!" he cried. "Have you anything to say before you kick?"

"Nothing, except that you are a confounded rascal—worse than I thought. I didn't know you were bad enough to take a man's life in cold blood."

"Gimme seven hundred dollars, and I'll let yer out of limbo sound and safe," answered Waxey.

"I have not the money," answered Tibbits.

"Well, it seems yer company don't think enough on yer to advance it, neither. Come, time's up!"

CHAPTER XI.

UNEXPECTED.

As he spoke, Waxey motioned to some of the gang, who at once seizing Ned by the coat-collar, dragged him through the opening at one side of the vault into the narrow passage leading into the well. Others of the gang followed with Loper. Having both arms and legs tied with strong cords, neither

of the young men could offer any resistance. They were drawn along towards the opening in the side of the well.

This aperture was at present well concealed by large pieces of rock, so that no person descending into the well could have detected it.

Waxey now proceeded to pull away the fragments of rock. This done, he again motioned to Jim Dunham, one of the men. The fellow was a dark, sullen-looking man, with an evil expression of the eyes.

He went into the vault, whence, soon after, he returned, carrying a large blacksmith's hammer.

"Which one shall I tackle first?" he inquired, looking from Tibbits to Loper.

"That one," answered Waxey, pointing to Loper. "Strike hard when you strike!"

"All right," answered Jim, as he raised the hammer above Loper's head.

For a moment he held it thus poised; then he brought it down with tremendous force.

Loper, however, succeeded in dodging it.

The hammer struck the paved ground with a ringing noise, and not having previously been very tight on the handle, it now flew off, and, passing through the aperture, fell into the well.

Waxey gave utterance to an oath of impatience.

Jim picked up the handle of the hammer, and with it struck Loper on the head, a blow which knocked him senseless.

"There," said the brute; "don't know as he's dead, but soon will be, after we roll him into the well."

Loper was dragged to the aperture and was quickly shoved through.

Ned Tibbits shuddered as he heard the body, with a dull splash, strike the water far below.

"Him next!" said Waxey, pointing toward Tibbits.

Jim Dunham advanced with the handle of the hammer, which, being heavy, well served the purposes of a club.

"Strike hard when you do strike!" said Baldy.

Jim raised the handle, and brought it down with great force, but dodging it as well as he could in the narrow space where he was, Tibbits received it a little slantingly on the side of the skull.

The blow stunned him for an instant. As he partially recovered his senses, he felt himself being dragged toward the aperture, overlooking the dark depths of the well.

Now was it fancy, or did he really hear the sound of voices near the well?

He resolved to do his best to gain time.

He contrived, as he was being dragged along, to get the rope that held his wrists over one of the fragments of rock, by which his course was thus impeded.

"Curse it!" cried Baldy. "The rope has caught against one of those stones."

As Dunham stooped to remove it, Ned, pretending to be still unconscious, dropped flat upon it and hugged the rock with his arms, without seeming purposely to do so.

"Hark! what is that?" cried Waxey, suddenly, while Dunham was still trying to pull Ned away from the piece of rock.

The sound of voices now was distinctly audible.

It came from the area, from which the noise of the stones being removed from the entrance could also be heard.

"To the door and bolt it!" cried Waxey. "I think it is the police who are coming."

"No," said Baldy, "the police wouldn't make so much noise."

Two of the men ran to the vault, and quickly fastened with lock and bolts a wooden door that opened upon the passage leading to the entrance.

Meanwhile Dunham, exerting himself with all his strength,

and assisted by one of the others, succeeded in getting Tibbits' arms away from the fragment of rock.

The young foreman, as he was being pushed head-foremost through the aperture, gave himself up for lost.

Further and further he was pushed through the aperture, and it seemed as if one more shove must send him down into the well, when all at once he heard a crash, succeeding the sound of blows which had previously saluted his ears; then there was a cheer, followed by a voice which he at once recognized as that of Bill Walsh.

"Down upon 'em, boys! Give it to 'em right and left! Let the rascals have it! We're here after Tibbits, we are, and if they don't tell us where he is we'll put a head on 'em all, such as they'll never forget!"

"This way, Bill—here I am!" shouted Tibbits.

A moment later Bill Walsh came bounding into the narrow passage, followed by half a dozen of his men.

The ruffians who had been pushing Tibbits now arose, and at the same time Walsh caught a good view of Ned's legs, which he seemed at once to recognize.

A desperate combat was going on.

The party in the vault and the men of Liberty Hose were about equal in number.

Bill Walsh, who had been giving some good blows, no sooner saw Tibbits' legs, than, with a bound, he sprang toward them.

Dunham, wrathful and dark, raised the hammer-handle, but ere he could use it, Bill sent both fists crashing into his eyes with such force that he fell over sideways.

"This way, boys!" shouted Walsh, in a ringing voice. "This way for Tibbits! To the rescue! Hoop—hoop—hoop—la!"

Who could oppose the Liberties now?"

Tibbits was the watchword, and you can bet it was a word that put the strength of two men in the arms of every one of the company.

Oh, the way the Liberties pitched into the roughs was a sight worth seeing.

Vainly the redoubtable Waxey, putting himself at the head of his gang, encouraged them with his words and his powerful blows.

The Liberties seemed to walk "right through" their foes, striking out with a rapidity and vigor which none of their opponents could withstand.

Meanwhile, Bill Walsh hauled Tibbits from his uncomfortable position, and with a knife quickly severed his bonds.

"How are you, Ned, old boy," said little Bill, with tears in his eyes as he fairly hugged the gallant foreman.

"How are you, Bill?" responded Ned. "I'm a little weak on the pins, but I think I can help the boys in spite of it."

Then, raising his voice, he shouted:

"Fight on, Liberties! Spread yourselves, boys, and let 'em have it! They are not going to get the best of us this time."

As he spoke he sprang up and still encouraging his men, he fought like a young lion.

There was science in the way he handled his fists. Sending them out to right and left with unerring precision, and in quick time, too, for there was never a man lighter on his toes than Tibbits, and the manner in which he danced about on the balls of his feet, as he delivered his sledge-hammer blows, was a caution to all his enemies.

You can just make up your mind that they did not like it at all, while, at the same time, the whole crowd couldn't help admiring his powers.

Bill Walsh wasn't behindhand, either.

Oh, you would have laughed to have seen the way that game little "rooster" made his fists fly up into the eyes and noses of some of the gang who looked big enough to eat him.

Side by side with Tibbits, Bill Walsh continued to assist his friends, and in less than a quarter of an hour later the vault was entirely cleared, and the Liberties remained masters of the rendezvous. The roughs had all fled, leaving the vault by the narrow passage leading to the outside opening into the rear.

CHAPTER XII.

TOM LOPER RESCUED.

"Well, boys," said Tibbits, "we have had a rough time of it, and to you all I tender my most hearty thanks for the brave manner in which you came to my rescue!"

"That's all right, Ned. Don't mention it. We're all with you, Ned, and would go through fire and water to serve you!"

These and similar cries greeted Tibbits' remarks.

"We have been so busy," continued Ned, "that we've had no time to look for Tom Loper!"

"Loper? Was he with you, then?" inquired Walsh.

"Yes; he was pushed into the well. I am afraid it is all up with him."

"Pshaw!" said Bill; "don't be too sure about that. There's deep water in the well, and Loper can swim."

"He could have done so had his arms and legs been free, but they were tied the same as mine were before you cut the cords with your knife," said Tibbits. "We must see to him without delay."

So saying, Ned tied the end of a rope he found in the vault about his waist.

As he did so, Walsh noticed that he could hardly stand.

"Tibbits, you're weak. This damp vault and poor fare have taken the sap out of you," said Bill. "Let me go in your place."

"No," answered Ned. "I'm the boy that's going to save Fanny's brother, if he can be saved at all."

"All right, if you say so," answered Bill. "But just take a pull at this before you go; it will do you good."

As he spoke he took a small flask of brandy from an inside pocket of his coat.

Tibbits was not much of a drinker, but under the circumstances he knew that the liquor would do him good.

Having partaken of it, he tied the upper end of the rope to a strong post at one end of the passage.

"Stand by to haul," he said, as he commenced to descend, with a lantern tied to his waist.

When he reached the bottom of the well he looked in vain for Loper.

The sapling pole which Walsh had used some days before was still in the well.

Ned made use of it, poking it about in the slanting hole under the water, but he could feel no human body.

"It is strange what could have become of him," muttered the foreman.

"Hallo, Tibbits! do you see anything?" called Walsh, from above.

"Nary a thing," answered Tibbits. "It's just the biggest mystery I ever heard of. I am sure he was pushed headlong into the well."

At that moment Ned fancied he heard a groan.

It was so low that he believed he had been deceived, until, on listening, he heard it again.

"Is it you, Loper? Where are you?" cried Tibbits.

There was no response.

"I must have made a mistake," murmured Ned. "The noise, after all, may have been caused by a stone, or by a piece of dirt dropping into the water."

He listened for some time, when, not hearing the sound, he was about to ascend the rope.

As he was doing so, however, he was sure—sure this time, that he heard a human voice.

"Who is it? Where are you?" he called.

No response.

Two minutes later Tibbits heard that noise again.

Carefully noticing from whence it came, he swung himself toward it.

Then, for the first time since entering the well, he noticed that some of the stones and earth, on one side of the pit, near the bottom, had fallen, leaving a small, dark hollow or cave, which was, perhaps, about half a foot above the level of the water.

Swinging himself into the hollow, Ned let go of the rope. Holding his lantern out, he then beheld a human form lying on a heap of stones.

The face was bloody, and the arms were doubled up under the head. The eyes were half closed.

"Loper, is that you?" said Ned. "But what's the use of asking? Of course——"

"Tibbits!" came in a faint voice from Loper.

"Well?" said Ned, as he proceeded to bathe Tom's face with some of the cool water near him.

"You are safe?" said Tom.

"Yes. The Liberties have won the day."

"I could die contented then," said Loper.

"Oh, come now," said Ned, "don't you go to talking of dying! You're all right. No bones broken, eh?"

"I think not," said Tom; "but somehow the fall has knocked all the wind out of me."

"How did you strike?"

"Headforemost, and went down into the hole, under water. How I came right side up, I don't know, but it is certain that I found myself, all at once, on the surface of the water. I also noticed that the cords which had been about my wrists were unfastened. They must have been cut by some stone under water."

"Doubtless. There is a stone of some kind at the bottom of that hole. I felt it with the end of the sapling I used for a pole."

"Finding my arms free," continued Tom, "I made a few feeble struggles, which at last brought me to this place, in which I sank exhausted, completely played out."

"The distance you fell is about thirteen feet. The well is not a deep one. You probably struck the side of it and bruised yourself."

Ned then called to Bill Walsh, informing him that he had found Tom Loper, and requesting him to send assistance so that the injured man could be hoisted up.

A few of the Liberties came sliding down by the rope.

One end of the latter was fastened about Loper's breast; then Ned, hanging on to the rope with one hand, and holding to his friend with the other, so as to keep him steady, gave the word for his men to haul.

The two were soon pulled up.

A little brandy revived Loper so that he was able to stand on his feet.

The other men in the well were then hauled up, after which the whole party left the rendezvous.

Supported by Ned and Bill Walsh, Loper was conducted home.

Mrs. Loper, on seeing her son restored to her, gave a cry of joy.

"Mother, what is it? Who has come?" was uttered in a faint voice from another room.

A thrill went through Tibbits at the sound of that familiar voice.

Mrs. Loper went into the other room, to soon reappear with Fanny, whom she had helped to dress herself.

She was paler and thinner than when Ned had seen her last.

But at sight of him a sudden change came over her.

Her cheeks flushed, her eyes brightened, her step was firmer.

The sight of the man she loved, and whom she had thought she would never see again, seemed to restore to her at once much of her lost strength.

"Ned—Ned!" she cried, and obeying the impulse of the moment, she threw herself into his arms.

Tibbits showered kisses upon her forehead, her cheeks and her lips.

"Fanny, my dear, you are not well," said Ned, as the young girl, blushing, withdrew herself from his arms.

"That's a fact, Ned; I am not," she answered. "To tell the truth, I have been worrying about you."

"Oh, ain't she sweet on him!" mentally exclaimed Bill Walsh.

"Well, now, here I am, safe and sound, and I hope the worry is over," said Ned.

"Yes, it is," answered Fanny. "I feel like a new being."

"I suppose I'm nowhere," said Tom Loper, a little reproachfully.

"Oh, Tom, I didn't think," cried Fanny; "but, of course, I've been worrying about you, too. Are you much hurt, Tom?"

"Not much, sis. My hip and my head have been bruised a little, but I'll soon get over it."

Bill Walsh now took leave of the Lopers.

Fanny and Ned sat up a long time, conversing together. They had so much to talk about that it was one o'clock before Tibbits went home.

Next day the police, having been informed of what had taken place there in the rendezvous, were looking for the offenders.

But Baldy and all the roughs had gone to parts unknown, and could not be found.

Days passed, and still not one of them returned.

The Smashers were then obliged to choose another foreman, and they selected Jerry Bonemaker.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE CHOWDER PARTY.

At this time the Liberties were making arrangements for their chowder party.

Fanny Loper, who had now fully regained her health, and who looked prettier even than she did before her illness, promised Ned that she would go with him.

Some of the other boys were also going to bring company with them.

You ought to have seen Bill Walsh's sweetheart.

She was so tall that Bill's head didn't reach above her shoulder.

She was a young, black-eyed thing, and everybody could see that she was sweet on Bill.

The day came when the Liberties and their friends were ready to start on their excursion.

A handsome sailboat had been hired, and it awaited them by a little dock on the Hudson river, near a place at that time called the Pavilion.

The whole party was soon there.

"They keep good ice cream here," remarked Bill.

At the word ice cream, you ought to have seen the eyes of the young ladies light up.

"If there's anyone here that wants ice cream, let her hold up her hand!" cried Ned.

In an instant every white hand was raised.

Seated at little tables, under the spreading branches of chestnut trees, the party were soon enjoying their cream.

Tibbits helped Fanny to two plates. Some of the young women were not satisfied until they had three.

Ned then treated the ladies all round to mint juleps.

"Now let's get underway," said the young foreman at last.

"There's a hard-looking crowd just gone up the river," remarked the proprietor of the Pavilion to the Liberties. "I'd advise you to keep clear of them."

"They had better not get in our way, or offer to molest us," said Bill Walsh.

"Oh, you're a blower," said the young man's fair companion, touching him with her fan.

"What's that, Janey?"

"I said you were a blower."

"Am I?" said Bill. "Come, now, you must either ask my pardon for that or give me a kiss."

"No, you don't," said Janey, and, with Bill in chase, away she ran, uttering those charming feminine screeches that come as naturally from young women as the warbling of birds.

Bill's legs were short, and those of the fugitive were long, but her pullback was in her way, and this enabled her pursuer to soon overtake her.

He caught her around the waist, and while she squirmed and wriggled to get away, he gave her several rousing smacks, greatly to the amusement of the spectators.

"Ah, now, you bad fellow, you shan't have any more!" cried Jane, when he had finished.

She looked so bright and rosy when she said this that, for his life, Bill could not resist the temptation to kiss her again.

"I think we'd better leave you two behind!" cried Tibbits to Walsh and his companion, as he helped Fanny into the boat.

At this Jane gave another screech, and ran with all her might toward the boat.

Walsh helped her into it, and soon the whole party were embarked.

Ned unfastened the warp, the sail was unrolled, the sheet hauled aft, and away went the boat, gliding swiftly up the river.

It had made about two miles, when, all at once, from around a projecting rock on the left, appeared another boat full of men.

"Those are probably the fellows we were warned about," said Loper.

"Yes," said Ned, "and I should say they are a hard set. They all seem to be drunk, and are singing."

"Let's keep out of their way, Ned," said Fanny, uneasily.

"I will as much as I can, for the ladies' sake," said Tibbits.

He headed the boat away from the other one, which was approaching, as stated, from the left.

"Ho-ho! See them quills run away!" came a loud, hoarse voice, from the bow of the other boat.

Fanny drew still closer to Ned's side.

"It is Baldy!" he said.

"Yes, that's Baldy, fast enough!" cried Bill Walsh, "but I can't say that I know any of the fellows with him."

Standing up, however, he suddenly added:

"Yes, there's Waxey, and I think I see Andy Jackman!"

The men were pulling a quick, heavy stroke.

Tibbits could not bear that they should think he was afraid of them.

He therefore slackened his speed.

"Boys," said he, "I hope, for the ladies' sake, that there'll be no row. But if there is, I know I can depend on you."

"Don't fight—don't fight!" pleaded all the women.

On came Baldy's boat.

"Here we come—we're the bully pirates, we are!" shouted Waxey.

When within about ten fathoms of the other boat, he said something in a low voice to his companions.

In an instant they began to hurl a shower of clam shells at Tibbits' party.

"Boys," said the young foreman, "there's no help for it. We'll have to pitch into those rascals."

He headed the boat straight for the other one.

Baldy and his companions picked up oars, and struck at them when they were within reach.

"Give it to 'em!" cried Ned, as he directed his boat alongside of theirs. "Now, Liberties, board them, and let them have it!"

With a cheer all the Liberties except one, who had been left at the tiller, sprang into the other boat.

Using oars as their opponents did, they pounded them with such good will that Baldy soon cried out:

"Enough!"

The truth was that these people were all so drunk that they could hardly stand.

Tibbits, perceiving this, now led his men back into the other boat, where many bright eyes were turned gratefully and admiringly upon him.

Baldy and his companions did not again attempt to molest the Liberties while they were on the river.

They kept on, and finally landed near a beautiful grove. There they at once commenced to make their chowder, the materials for which they had brought with them.

Now I don't believe you'd find two better men at making chowder than Tibbits and Bill Walsh. They knew the exact proportion of clams and pork to put in with the potatoes; nevertheless, the young women kept chaffing them about it.

"Oh, what cooks!" said Jane.

"They don't know how to make chowder," said Hattie, a pretty young girl of seventeen, who, in due time, intended to change her name to that of Loper.

"And see in what big pieces they cut their potatoes," cried another pretty young woman.

"They won't get me to eat any of their chowder."

"Easy, ladies, easy," said Ned, gravely, as he flitted about the bubbling pot. "When the chowder is done you who complain the most will eat the biggest share."

In fact, this proved to be the case.

When the chowder was done and the party seated on the grass, about a clean, white table-cloth spread thereon, it was soon discovered that the ladies enjoyed the chowder they were helped to with even more zest than their male companions.

Perhaps this was owing to the many cigars which the Liberties had smoked on their way up the river.

Arm in arm with Hattie, after the meal was finished, Fanny Loper strolled away from the others.

These two young women were great friends, and as they walked on they chatted merrily together.

"Had we not better go back? We are far from our friends," said Fanny, suddenly, as she gazed about her.

"If they are not anxious enough about us to look for us we will continue to remain away from them," said Hattie, pouting. "At any rate, before I start to go back, I am going to explore this house."

The building she alluded to was an old, deserted one, with broken panes, most of them boarded up.

It was about thirty feet high, with a sharp, sloping roof,

and with a piazza on the second story as well as on the first. Hattie ran up the front steps and tried the door.

It was fastened.

"Oh, dear," she said, "but I'm not going to be balked. This is an old Dutch mansion, and I'm determined to have a look at the inside of it."

Close to one side of the house arose a tall pole, with wide blocks of wood for steps nailed to it.

Hattie, who was perhaps a little wild, said to Fanny:

"I can mount those steps. You can see they will be so easy to go up as stairs."

"Don't go," said Fanny.

"Yes, I will, and you must go with me."

The sprightly young woman commenced to mount the steps, and Fanny saw how easy they were to climb. Little did she dream that a pair of fierce eyes were turned toward her and her companion from a thick clump of shrubbery, about twenty yards to the left of the house.

In fact, Baldy was there concealed, watching every movement of the young girls.

"Hope you'll both go into that house," muttered the villain. "If you do, you'll never come out of it alive, unless Fanny consents to be my wife. I'm bound to have my revenge both on Tibbits and Loper, but especially on Tibbits. If I can't make away with that accursed foreman of the Liberties, I'll at least have the satisfaction of balking him with respect to the girl he thinks he's going to marry."

As a deadly snake watches its intended victims, so did Baldy keep his evil gaze fixed on the young ladies.

After he and his companions in the boat had been defeated by Tibbits and his party, he had watched the Liberties until he saw them disappear round a headland.

Then he had requested his associates to pull him to land, and as soon as he gained the shore, he had left them.

Moving along the bank, he soon came in sight of the Liberties, and he followed them unseen, keeping himself screened by trees and shrubbery.

He still clung to his deadly purpose of killing Tibbits, and after the foreman landed, he waited in vain for a chance to carry out his design.

Concealed in a thicket, he gazed at the merry chowder party, and mentally cursed them all, while he fingered the handle of a stiletto which he had lately purchased, and which he carried in his breast pocket.

Baldy had once been an apprentice to a cutler, so that he had been capable of choosing a good weapon.

The blade of the stiletto was nearly eight inches long, with a point like a needle, and the steel was finely tempered.

To make his work more sure, he had steeped the point in a poisonous preparation obtained from an Indian doctor.

As shown, Tibbits had not yet left his company, and fearing that after all he might not have a chance to carry out his purpose, Baldy, on seeing the girls, Fanny and Hattie, stroll off together, resolved to follow them, and, if possible, gratify his hatred of the foreman and of Loper in the manner already stated.

Oh, there could be no mistake about it that Baldy was a bad one—worse than any of his crowd. There were Waxey, Andy Jackman and Jim Duham—all hard boys, but neither of them would have thought of harming a woman because she jilted him and preferred the man he hated.

Now, just look at Hattie as she climbs the pole! Her cheeks are so rosy, her eyes so bright with happiness, her form so supple, so light and graceful, that it does not seem possible that any man could have the heart to injure her.

And yet, there is Baldy—that black-hearted snake—watching her, and vowing that he will have both her life and that

of her companion before they leave the lonely house, unless Fanny can be made to consent to be his wife.

CHAPTER XIV.

IN THE HOUSE.

Hattie kept on up the pole.

When she reached the top of it, she was able to step from it to the roof of the house, as it was only about a foot from the cornice of the building.

"Come, Fanny, come!" she cried. "It is as easy as going up a pair of stairs."

She clapped her hands and laughed as she spoke.

Her eyes shining like stars, and her ringlets streaming back in the wind, presented a pretty picture.

She seemed to think that her being up so high greatly enhanced her importance, and she arched her swan-like neck proudly.

Fanny now also climbed up the pole, and she was soon by her friend's side.

Hattie went to the scuttle. It had hooks on the outside, but as these were unfastened, a slight pull enabled her to remove it.

There was a ladder leading down into the garret, and by means of it the young ladies entered the house.

At the same moment Baldy emerged from his hiding-place.

He looked carefully about him, to make sure that no person saw him.

Then he mounted the pole, got upon the roof, and descended into the garret.

He listened and heard the voices of the young women in a room below.

He saw a flight of stairs, and by means of these he soon reached the room occupied by the girls.

Both shrieked on seeing that evil-looking form appear before them.

"It is Baldy!" gasped Fanny.

"Yes, I am Baldy; you can just bet I'm nobody else, and I have a few words to say to you, Fanny Loper."

"What can you have to say to me?" inquired Fanny. "How came you here? What business have you here?"

"Yes, what business have you here?" also cried Hattie, drawing herself up.

"Yer'll soon find out, Miss Loper; I want yer to go with me!"

"Go with you? What do you mean!" cried Fanny, with blended fear and anger.

"I jist mean what I say. Look here," and as he spoke he pulled the stiletto from his breast pocket.

"Whom do you think to frighten with that?" said Fanny, although inwardly her heart quaked with terror.

"Come now," said Baldy, with a frown, "you know well enough there is no sawdust about me. If you refuse to go with me, I'll jist bury this knife in both your hearts. If you consent to go, all right; you save your lives."

"Where do you want me to go?" inquired Fanny.

"Never mind; I want you to be my wife."

"I would die a hundred deaths first," answered Fanny.

"I would gratify you if I could," said Baldy, "but the fact is, I can only kill yer once."

Hattie, much frightened, had turned as pale as death.

"By refusing you sacrifice this other one, too," said Baldy to Fanny. "Come, you'd better think better of it," and as he spoke, he advanced with the stiletto uplifted.

Both girls were cornered. Baldy was between them and the only door that opened from the room.

Slowly and steadily he advanced, still holding the dagger, so terrible to the feminine eye, uplifted.

"God help us!" cried Hattie.

Then she began to scream.

Fanny mustered all her resolution, but her heart sank within her, for she had heard enough of Baldy to know that he would carry out his purpose.

Besides, she could perceive that he had not yet fully recovered from his intoxication.

His bloodshot eyes, his red, inflamed visage, and a certain unsteadiness in his gait, betokened that he was in that state when a bad man will not hesitate at the perpetration of the most terrible crime.

Nearer every moment he came, until at last the deadly steel gleamed within a few inches of her breast.

"Consent, Fanny, consent!" faltered Hattie, hardly knowing what she said—"consent, and save both our lives!"

"Very well; I consent to go with you," gasped Fanny, hoping that she might contrive to escape him on the way.

"You consent to be my wife," cried Baldy, with a sort of savage joy.

"I did not say that."

"You said you would go with me?"

"Yes."

"All right; that means the same thing. Come!"

And as he spoke, he seized her by the arm.

"You do not require my friend to go with you, too?" said Fanny.

"No; but she must tell no tales; at least not until I've made sure of you as my wife."

"What are you going to do with her?" inquired Fanny.

"I am going to keep her shut up here until her friends come and take her out, if that ever happens."

He now made Fanny ascend to the foot of the ladder leading up to the scuttle.

"Mount," he said to her. "You must go before me. I'm not the boy to have any tricks played on me."

"I would first speak to my friend. I have something to say to her."

"Well, be quick about it."

Fanny went to Hattie, and whispered a few words in her ear.

Then she returned to the foot of the ladder.

"Come, up you go!" said Baldy.

The young girl ran up the steps with the agility of a fawn.

The moment she reached the roof she seized the ladder, just as Baldy was about to mount it, and pushing it inward, so that the bottom part slid along the floor, she allowed it to drop.

It fell flat upon the floor.

"Halloo! what did you do that for?" cried Baldy. "Yer can't come any such game on this boy!"

Fanny heard the door of the room in which Hattie was close at the same moment.

"Good!" she murmured. "She has done what I told her to do."

Then she heard the key turn in the lock, and she knew that her friend had locked the door.

"Now then," she cried, triumphantly to Baldy, "you thought you were going to have everything your own way, but I will show you that you were mistaken."

As she spoke she clapped the scuttle over the opening in the roof, and fastened it by means of the hooks, which, as stated, were on the outside.

The hooks had evidently been placed there to secure the

scuttle, as it fitted loosely, and might otherwise blow away, there being no fastening on the inside.

Baldy, by this time, had replaced the ladder and mounted it.

"Let me out!" he roared, "or it will be the worse for you."

And he commenced to bang furiously at the scuttle.

"Don't be in a hurry," said Fanny, maliciously. "I daresay you will come out in good time."

"You shall suffer for this!" cried Baldy. "Fool that I was to permit you to go up before me!"

The young girl, standing up and gazing over the tops of the trees, could dimly see the forms of the Liberties still by the shore of the river.

Again and again did she wave her kerchief as a signal, but intervening masses of shrubbery would have screened her from the gaze of her friends, even had they chanced to look toward her.

The house was some distance from the place they occupied, so that neither by shouting nor signaling could she have made known her situation.

"Let me out!" repeated Baldy, as he continued to bang at the scuttle. "If you don't, I swear to you that I will kill your friend, who is still here!"

Fanny made no reply. She was undecided whether to remain where she was, and trust to the Liberties coming toward the house and seeing her, or to leave the roof, and with all possible speed run to the party and tell them what had happened.

She did not like to quit her position.

She knew that Hattie had shut and locked the door of the room she occupied, but she feared that Baldy might succeed in battering it down while she was absent, and perhaps murder the girl before she (Fanny) could bring her friends to the rescue.

Finally, therefore, she concluded to remain.

Then, should Baldy break open the door, she could make her appearance before him in time to save Hattie's life.

She had no fear of his beating open the scuttle, for this was provided, as previously stated, with strong hooks. It had also an iron cross bar, which she had taken care to put in its place.

"So you won't let me out, eh?" cried Baldy at last, desisting from his useless efforts to force the scuttle. "Well, then, your friend is as good as dead. I'm agoin' for her now."

Fanny heard him descend the steps of the ladder; then she heard him bang at the door.

"Help—help! Oh, what will become of me?" screamed Hattie from the room.

Furiously Baldy continued to beat at the door.

All at once Fanny heard the door give way and swing back on its hinges as the lock was broken.

Then she heard the shrieks of the young girl, with which, however, was blended the sound of her fleeing footsteps.

She comprehended the truth in a moment.

Hattie had somehow contrived to elude Baldy, probably by getting near the door, so that she was behind it when it was forced open, and she was now speeding along the hall, hoping to find some place of refuge.

Fanny unbarred and unhooked the scuttle, and entering the garret, she listened.

The sounds of pursuer and pursued now were heard in the rooms below as they had descended the stairs.

Fanny trembled in every limb. She pictured the fear of Hattie with that ruffian Baldy, a dagger in his hand, close behind, in chase of her.

"Stop, Baldy, stop! Don't harm her! I have opened the scuttle. I am here!"

But there came no response.

Her fright had hindered her speaking loud enough to make her voice heard.

All at once she heard a terrible noise.

It was a half-smothered gurgling, something between a rattling in the throat and a shriek.

Then came Hattie's voice, now faintly borne to the ears of the listener.

"Help—help—help! Oh, God, have mercy!"

The next moment all was still.

CHAPTER XV.

THE CELLAR.

Fanny stood as if fastened to the floor.

She had not the power to move.

Her terror was so great that she felt as if her heart was about to be stilled forever.

Neither the voice of Baldy nor of her friend was now heard.

A dead silence reigned throughout the old, gloomy house. At last, by a great effort, the young girl controlled herself. "Hattie—Hattie!" she called.

There was no response.

"He has killed her—she is dead!" murmured Fanny.

But if so, where was Baldy?

Slowly Fanny descended the stairs.

She now found herself in a large, gloomy hall, dimly lighted by a window, half boarded up on one side.

She hurried on until she came to a door, which she found fastened.

This was simply the back door of the hall. It was partially boarded up, and the lock, which was visible, had in it no key.

Behind her she felt a draught of cool air, and on turning she beheld a door which was open.

She looked through the opening.

At first, owing to the darkness, she could see nothing, but gradually, as her eyes became accustomed to the gloom, she could make out a number of casks.

Then she comprehended that she was now at the head of a staircase leading into the cellar of the house.

This cellar was packed with casks, which emitted a peculiar oily odor.

"Hattie—Hattie!" she called.

No reply.

Slowly she descended the staircase; then she peered carefully through the darkness.

At first she could make out nothing but the casks.

Gradually, however, she was enabled to distinguish a strange form.

It was that of a hideous old hag, with matted hair, blazing eyeballs, and a face almost as thin as a skeleton's. She wore a tattered dress, there were no shoes on her feet; in fact, she was a miserable object to look upon.

The expression of her eyes was wild and vacant. One glance convinced Fanny that she was insane.

"Good Heaven!" cried the young girl, "who are you?"

"Who am I?" said the old hag, looking up, "who am I? Yes—yes, you are right?"

As she spoke the woman, who had been seated on a cask, arose and moved to one side.

There, stretched senseless upon the casks, Fanny beheld the form of her friend Hattie, and not far from it, that of Baldy, who was also unconscious.

"Hah—hah!" shrieked the hag, pointing to the Smashers' foreman. "He's a good boy—a good boy, but I thought I'd

punish him for never coming to see me. His mother I am—and I've wanted to see him a long time, and ask him how he gets along."

Fanny shuddered.

A light broke upon her mind.

She doubted not that the miserable creature she saw before her was really Baldy's mother.

She had heard that he had a mother in an insane asylum somewhere near the Hudson river.

This unfortunate person had evidently contrived, as lunatics sometimes do, to escape from the asylum. She had come upon the old house, had climbed by the pole to the roof, had entered the building through the scuttle, and made her way to the cellar.

On seeing her son enter the cellar, a few minutes previous to the present time, in pursuit of Hattie, she had struck him over the head with a stout stick or club, which she now held in her right hand.

Then, having thus knocked him senseless, she had probably seized Hattie by the throat, at which time it was that Fannie had heard her friend utter those gurgling cries for help.

A moment later the terrified girl had fainted, and then the crazy woman had let go of her.

All these thoughts passed through Fanny's mind very quickly.

"What do you want here?" cried the hag, brandishing her club. "This is my home—this is my cave! Away—away!"

And she advanced toward Fanny as she spoke.

At that instant Baldy half-raised himself with a groan. The hag turned and looked toward him.

"So you are awake at last!" she cried.

With another groan, Baldy staggered to his feet.

Before he could see her, Fanny took refuge behind the cellar door.

All at once she heard a cry of rage and disgust from Baldy.

The old woman, his mother, was evidently advancing toward him with her club upraised.

Fanny heard him rush up the cellar steps.

His mother followed at his heels, shrieking out:

"No, you don't! You don't escape me!"

"Curse it! Who would have thought of meeting her here. She has spoiled all my plans!" murmured Baldy, as he hurried along through the hall.

"My son—my boy, come back!" screamed his mother.

But Baldy kept on, and Fanny felt sure that he would quit the house.

"Thank God—they will both leave the house!" said Fanny to herself. "And now for poor Hattie!"

Before returning to the cellar, however, she peered through a crack in the boards over the window, and saw Baldy descending the pole.

He ran swiftly as soon as he reached the ground, and plunged into the shrubbery in the distance.

Soon after the young girl saw his mother also descend the pole.

Seen by the clear light outside, the face of the unfortunate woman, who had been crazed by liquor, bore some resemblance to that of her son.

On reaching the foot of the pole, she ran along toward the thicket in the distance.

Fanny now hurried into the cellar.

As she knelt by the side of her friend, Hattie opened her eyes.

"Where am I?" she said, looking wildly around her.

"Here!" said Fanny. "I am with you."

Hattie seemed, for some moments, quite bewildered.

"Oh, yes, I remember now!" she suddenly cried. "That horrid man—that horrid woman! Where are they, Fanny?"

"Gone!" answered Fanny.

"Are you sure?"

"Come with me, and let us see. Are you able to walk?"

"Oh, yes; now that I know we are safe."

The two girls left the cellar, and both looked through the cracks of the boards over the window in the hall.

To their dismay, they saw Baldy again ascending the pole.

"Oh, dear!" gasped Fanny, "he has been watching, and not having seen us leave the house, he judges that we are still here."

"What shall we do?" said Hattie.

"We must hide."

"But where?"

Fanny looked around her.

Suddenly her gaze was caught by a large rope, having a hook at the end of it.

"That rope must be there to hoist these casks with," she cried. "There is a platform projecting from the side of the cellar, about five feet above the casks. Do you see it?"

"Yes," said Hattie.

"Well, that platform is in the shadow. No person could see us if we were there. We must climb to it by the rope, pull up the rope after us, and crouch down."

"Let us make haste," said Hattie, as the sound of Baldy's descending footsteps was heard.

The two girls were soon on the platform, crouching in the darkness.

Ten minutes later Baldy entered the cellar and looked around him.

He could not have seen the young women, even had he had a light.

There was a plank on the edge of the platform high enough to conceal their forms as they both lay flat.

Having looked carefully around him and convinced himself that the persons he sought were not there, Baldy left the cellar to look for them in other parts of the building.

The two girls could hear his heavy footsteps as he wandered in his search from room to room.

At last they heard him returning to the cellar.

"Well," he muttered, "one thing is sure, they have not left the house. Where are you?" he called out, in a loud voice.

Of course, the girls made no reply.

"I say, where are you?" shouted Baldy again, with all his might.

Hattie had, by this time, so far recovered from her terror that she could not help feeling amused at hearing the man calling her and her companion, when both were within a few feet of him.

With difficulty could she repress a giggle, which, in fact, was only prevented by Fanny pinching her arm.

"Come, now," cried Baldy again. "Are yer here or not? If you are, you'd best answer me, or there'll be trouble for yer."

He then stood listening for a few seconds, but of course there was no reply.

"Well," cried the ruffian, in a rage, "if yer won't answer me, yer won't; and now there's goin' to be mischief."

His gaze was fixed upon the casks, dimly visible in the cellar.

"I happen to know," he continued, now speaking to himself, "that them casks have petroleum in 'em. They were put in this cellar for safe-keeping by a firm who have a fact'ry not far from here, so that they might be in a handy place for transportation to the river. Petroleum will go off like gunpowder, and I mean to make this 'ere petroleum go off in that way."

"God help us!" whispered Fanny to Hattie. "Did you hear

that? He is going to explode the petroleum, which, it seems, these casks contain."

Baldy had left the cellar, and so he did not hear the whisper.

"Had we not better leave our hiding-place, then?" said Hattie, in great terror.

Fanny reflected a moment ere she answered.

"We had better remain where we are for the present," she then said. "Of course, that bad man will not dare to explode the petroleum at once when he undertakes to carry out his purpose, because if he did he would be destroyed as well as ourselves. He will prepare some kind of a wisp or train, will light the end and leave it to burn down to the edge. Then the explosion will take place, or rather, would take place were we not here to prevent it. We can extinguish the wisp."

"Would you not be afraid to do that?"

"No; there would be no danger with a little care. But hush! Here he comes."

In fact, Baldy now re-entered the cellar.

He was provided with a piece of tarred canvas which he had torn from the boards over one of the windows.

This canvas he rolled up into the wisp; then he crept along over the top of the casks until he reached the center.

With his penknife he proceeded to make an incision in the head of this cask.

Having finally succeeded in making a hole large enough, he thrust the end of the wisp into it.

Then he took from a box in his pocket a match, which he lighted.

As the gleam from it spread through the cellar, he looked around him.

He saw the platform at one end, but as the girls were crouched behind the high board on the edge of it, and as the momentary light from the match hardly reached their hiding-place, they were not observed.

"Now, then," murmured Baldy, "those young women must still be somewhere in the building, and the explosion can't fail to shatter the house. Ha, ha! Miss Loper, I'm a-goin' to be even with yer now!"

As he spoke he lighted the end of the wisp.

Having assured himself that it would burn down to the cask, he turned quickly to leave the cellar, so as to make his escape as soon as possible from the now dangerous house.

But as he moved hurriedly along his leg slipped over the edge of one of the casks, and down went the limb between it and another cask. Clutching the edge of this cask as he fell, he caused it to slip in such a way over another upon which it was placed, that it fell against his leg, holding it so tightly that he was unable to disengage it.

The wretched man, fully comprehending the horror of his situation, made desperate efforts to free himself.

He writhed, he twisted his body from side to side, he pushed at the cask, vainly endeavoring to move it.

For a minute he continued his useless exertions, without looking at the wisp.

He did not like to look at it; the very thought made his blood run cold.

But now he ventured to steal a glance at it, and he noticed that it was burning steadily toward the end—that it was already nearly half-way down.

No hope of its going out—not the least. He had prepared it too well for that, little dreaming at the time that he would be caught in the horrid trap he had prepared for others.

The perspiration came out like rain on his forehead, as he renewed his struggles to free himself from his terrible situation.

He became desperate, and pulled so at his leg that he almost dislocated it.

Wildly gesticulating with his arms, he called for assistance.

"Miss Loper, where are you?" he yelled. "For God's sake, come and try to help get me clear! I am caught here among the casks, in the cellar! The petroleum is going to blow up, and I shall be a dead man!"

Even as he pronounced her name, Fanny Loper, followed by Hattie, got down from the platform.

"We must be quick!" said Hattie, "or we are lost!"

"Put out the wisp," shouted Baldy, "then come and help me!"

"You have given us good reason to wish to help you!" said Fanny.

"I know I've done wrong—I know I have!" cried Baldy, pitifully, "but don't be too hard on a feller, miss—don't. It's the way I've been brought up—always mixing with men of jest the hardest kind."

Fanny looked at the burning wisp without answering.

Then she moved quickly toward it.

But Baldy, in fixing it in its place, had, unconsciously, tipped up a cask in front of it, which was only about half-full.

This cask, as Fanny was endeavoring to climb over it, slipped and fell, so that it overhung the head of the one containing the piece of tarred cloth.

The young girl just saved herself from going with it by nimbly stepping backward.

The fallen cask was in her way. She might, with great exertion, have succeeded in getting around it, but it would have taken so long to do this that she feared the explosion would take place ere she would have time to remove or to extinguish the wisp.

"I can do nothing now," she said to Hattie.

"Come—come away!" cried the latter.

"I am afraid I will have to," answered Fanny.

"Oh, no, Miss Loper!" shrieked Baldy. "Don't—don't leave me in this plight. You can reach that wisp in time to put it out."

"I do not think so," said Fanny.

"Nor I—nor I!" cried Hattie. "Come, let us go!"

"Oh, dear, bad as this man is, I do not like to leave him in this situation!" cried Fanny, with that true benevolence natural to the female character.

"It does not seem exactly the thing to do," said Hattie, "but I do not see as there is any help for it."

"At any rate," said Fanny, "we will try and move away the cask from his leg."

"If we succeed in freeing him he will shut us up here in the cellar to die," said Hattie.

"No! Oh, no, I won't. I'm not the boy to do anything quite so bad as that!" whined Baldy.

Fanny believed him.

It did not seem possible to her that there could be any human being evil enough to injure those who should help to save his life.

"Come, Hattie," she said. "We must be quick. There is no time to lose!"

She made her way to the cask which had slipped against Baldy's leg, and then Hattie followed.

The two young women, assisted by the unfortunate man, tugged and tugged at it in vain.

They could not even budge the heavy cask.

"We can do no more!" said Miss Loper, who was almost exhausted. "We will have to leave you."

"Leave me?" shrieked Baldy. "No, no. I'm lost if yer do."

"We would be lost, too," said Hattie. "I shouldn't wonder if it is too late, even now, for us to escape!"

"You shall not leave me!" cried Baldy, fiercely. "No, if I am to die, you shall die, too!"

And as he spoke he caught Fanny by the arm, and held her with an iron grip.

CHAPTER XVI.

CONCLUSION.

Fanny Loper, when she found herself thus held in the grasp of the wretched man, whose life she had just been striving to save, was both terrified and indignant.

"Let go of me!" she cried, struggling with all her might.

But Baldy kept his hold, while through the partial gloom his eyes gleamed like balls of flame.

"We shall be blown up together," he yelled, triumphantly. "I shall have my revenge after all!"

Vainly Fanny endeavored to free herself. The grasp of the villain was like that of a vise.

Hattie endeavored for a while to pull her friend away from Baldy, but she was soon exhausted.

"Run, Hattie, and save yourself!" cried Fanny. "There is no other way. If I must be sacrificed, it is no reason that you should be, too!"

Hattie wrung her hands and began to cry, as she left the cellar.

"Good-by, Fanny, if it must be so," she sobbed.

"Good-by," answered Fanny, "and God bless you!"

Hattie ran with full speed up the stairs, and soon gained the roof.

She looked eagerly about the broad extent of country now exposed to her view, for some person or persons whom she might summon to the rescue of her friend, forgetting for the moment that long ere they could reach the imperiled girl the explosion must take place, and, in the most horrible manner, put an end to the life of her beloved friend.

She saw no one, however, and she now leaned over from the edge of the roof and grasped the pole, which she commenced to descend.

This pole, as previously stated, had long, strong cross-pieces of wood nailed to it. They were about three feet in length, and not being more than six inches apart, and of course projecting out on each side of the pole, they were more easy to mount or descend than a ladder would have been.

Consequently, Hattie was not long in reaching the ground.

The moment her feet touched the earth, she started on a run toward the river bank, where the Liberties were still gathered; but she had not proceeded more than fifty yards when the uselessness of seeking the assistance of her male friends occurred to her, and she paused, turning her gaze back in the direction of the house.

"No use; it would blow up even before I could reach our party," she cried despairingly. "Oh, Fanny, Fanny! Poor Fanny!"

Scarcely had she uttered the words, when there came a report, like that of a launched thunderbolt, seeming to shake the ground under her very feet.

The old house tottered for a moment, then it fell with crushing timbers, and a dense volume of smoke and flame enveloped it, for an instant, like a flaming shroud.

With one long, wild, despairing cry Hattie, throwing up both arms, fell senseless to the earth.

Where now was Fanny?

After her friend left her, she had renewed her struggles to get away from Baldy, meanwhile beseeching him to let her go.

At length, by one desperate effort, she succeeded in twisting her supple form so far from him, that, unable to clasp her

with both arms, owing to an intervening cask, and to his legs being confined as described, which kept him in one position, his hold was slightly loosened.

"No, yer don't!" he cried, fiercely, making an effort to regain a firm grasp of the girl.

But in doing so he twisted his leg so that it caused him the most excruciating pain, and in his agony he entirely lost his hold of Fanny.

Finding herself free, she darted up the cellar stairs, and ran to the door at the back of the hall.

Then Fanny saw before her an opening in the broken wood-work of the door, large enough for her to crawl through.

She crept through it as quickly as she could, to find herself now on the back stoop of the building.

A few yards off there was a small brick house, not more than seven feet high. She thought it had once been a smoke-house or something of that sort; at all events, it might serve to partially shield her when the catastrophe she expected should occur.

The little building having no door she speedily entered it, to find herself at the head of a flight of stone steps.

Quickly descending these, she entered a sort of stone apartment provided with shelves, by which she knew that she was in a milk dairy—a place in which the inhabitants of the old Dutch building once kept their milk and cheese.

Scarcely had she time to look around her when she heard the thunder of the explosion, followed by the rushing of huge pieces of timber and planks, as they fell upon the little habitation to which she had retreated.

The bricks gave way, and many of them fell at her feet.

Gazing upward, she perceived that a great mass of lumber now covered the passageway through which she had come.

Through openings in this mass of joists and broken planks, she could see the glare of the flames, which now enveloped the building on every side.

Shuddering at her narrow escape, she gazed upward at the crackling, roaring sheets of fire as they surged skyward through the rolling smoke.

Then she thought of Baldy, whose disfigured body must now lie buried in the burning ruins of the cellar.

The old building burned rapidly, and finally, blending with the noise of the flames, Fanny could hear the shouts of men outside, and among them she fancied she could recognize the voice of Ned Tibbits.

She called with all her might, but, far down as she was, under the falling timbers, she doubted if her weak voice was strong enough to be heard by her lover.

He would think she had perished, for, ere now, Hattie must have met him and have explained to him her situation, there in the cellar of the house.

In about an hour there was little of the old building left.

Fanny mounted the stone steps, and peered through the openings in the timbers piled about the entrance of the ruined little dairy building; but she could see no sign of the men whose voices she had previously heard.

In fact, Ned Tibbits, overwhelmed by the disaster which he believed had deprived him of the girl he loved, had, followed by his companions, gone to the same grove, whence Baldy had previously watched the young ladies climb the pole and enter the building.

There he sat on a log, with his face buried in his hands.

"Boys," he said, at last, in a husky voice that drew tears to the eyes of the hardy men who had followed him through so many perils, "Boys, leave me alone for a little while."

They exchanged melancholy glances, and sadly they withdrew, the weeping Hattie accompanying them, leaning on the arm of her lover, Tom Loper.

When Ned was left to himself he took from his pocket a

miniature likeness of Fanny, and gazed at it long and earnestly.

Meanwhile Fanny, down in the vault of the dairy, stood in a listening attitude, hoping that the Liberties would return.

At last she heard voices, but she knew they were not those of Tibbits and his party.

Other people had noticed the glare of the fire, and had probably come from a distance to see it.

But they did not yet approach the pile of timbers heaped up over the ruins of the dairy house, and the young girl knew that she could not make them hear her.

At last, however, footsteps sounded near her retreat.

She ran up the stones, and peered through the openings among the beams and planks.

All at once she drew back with a low cry of dismay.

A weird, wild-looking figure was just outside of the debris, looking through the crevices of the pile.

Fanny could see this creature plain enough to recognize her at a glance.

It was Baldy's mother—the same crazy woman who had previously so frightened her and Hattie in the cellar of the Dutch house.

That this person saw the girl was now evident, for she commenced to pluck at the joists and boards with her claw-like hands, and to throw them to one side.

She worked with almost superhuman strength and rapidity, and soon she had made an opening in the pile large enough to admit her wasted, skeleton form.

Fanny had crouched upon the stone steps.

It did not take the woman long to force her way to the entrance of the vault—to the head of the stone steps.

There she stood, looking down at Fanny, who was now upon her feet, her gaze meeting that of the crazy woman.

"Ha—ha! so I have you!" cried the latter, in a wild, fierce voice. "Where is my Baldy? What have you done with my son?"

"He was lost," answered Fanny.

"Lost? It was your fault! You are the one that lured him to his fate! How can I ever collect his bones for burial?"

"I had nothing to do with his death; in fact, I tried to save him."

"Oh, yes!" cried the woman, with a hideous laugh. "So you say, but you cannot deceive me. Now, then, as I cannot get at any part of my son to bury, I am going to bury you!"

Then, suddenly, with a cry something like that of a hyena, she threw herself upon her intended victim, and clutched her by the arms.

Fanny screamed with all her might, while she writhed and struggled to free herself from the hag, whose bony fingers sank into her flesh as if they were made of steel.

"I've got yer, my beauty! Ha, ha! Come along!" cried the lunatic, as she drew Fanny up the stone steps.

The young girl continued to scream, but her captor drew her on into the opening she had made among the timbers.

"Now, I'm going to bury you!" she cried.

With that she threw Fanny down, and in spite of her struggles, contrived, with her old shawl, to fasten her to a heavy beam.

"Yes," she then continued, "I am going to bury you in the timber, which I mean to pile upon you as high as a mountain, so that you can never get up!"

Vainly Fanny struggled to arise.

The hag commenced to lay boards and joists upon her rapidly, and soon her prostrate form was nearly covered.

The weight became every moment more hard to bear.

The young girl felt as if she was being crushed.

Her limbs ached with the fast-increasing pressure, which, as plank after plank was laid upon her, became terrible.

She could scarcely breathe—she was suffocating.

Her brain throbbed and reeled, and a sort of mist, through which she could see the round, greenish orbs of the hag gleaming like those of some horrible ogre, seemed to gather before her vision.

She felt that all would soon be over; she was, in fact, becoming unconscious, when suddenly she fancied she heard loud voices near her, the terrible hag seemed to recede, and she experienced a sensation of blissful relief.

"Fanny—Fanny! Speak to me!" rang a familiar voice in her ears.

Full consciousness returned to her, the mist cleared from before her eyes, and she saw the bright, cheerful face of Tibbits, as, with one arm supporting her head on his breast, he looked down upon her.

"Oh, Ned!" she said, and she raised her lips to his for a kiss, which was heartily given.

Then Fanny staggered to her feet, assisted by her lover, to find herself the next moment in the arms of her friend Hattie.

"Fanny—Fanny! Thank God you are saved!" she cried.

Then the air rang with the cheers of the Liberties as they all gathered around.

"How did you rescue me?" inquired Fanny of Tom Loper, who now came up and embraced her. "And where is that dreadful woman? I hope you have not harmed her, for she was crazy."

"She is not harmed. She is in the charge of people who will take her back to the asylum, from which, it seems, she escaped a few days ago. It was Tibbits who saved you. He came back to the fire, when he fancied he heard a scream. This led him to the pile of timbers, where he found you in the clutch of the hag. He shouted to the rest of us to come up, and you can bet it didn't take him long to reach you to pull that crazy woman away from you. The rest of us came up, and some took charge of her, while the others helped Tibbits remove the timber from you and clear a passage to carry you outside of the pile. Now then, tell us, Fan, how you came there."

The young girl explained in a few words.

Then, supported by Tibbits, and followed by the rest of the company, she was conducted to the riverbank, where a little wine refreshed her and partially restored her strength.

The whole party were soon after in the boat on their return to their homes, which they reached in due time.

A week later Tibbits and Fanny Loper were married. All the Liberties were at the wedding, and they made a pleasant party.

Ned and his pretty wife were well mated. A happier couple were never united in the sacred bonds of matrimony.

But he did not resign his position of foreman. Even today, though he is a great deal older than when our story occurred, and has a little curly-headed Ned of his own, he is still leader and master spirit, with Billy Walsh as his assistant, of Liberty Hose, the Pride of Plattsville.

THE END.

Read "AMONG THE SUN WORSHIPPERS; Or, TWO NEW YORK BOYS IN PERU," which will be the next number (478) of "Pluck and Luck."

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THINGS OF INTEREST.

The most unique method of delivering mail doubtless is that employed by steamers passing the islands of the Tonga group in the Pacific. On account of many reefs landing is extremely dangerous, and the few letters to be delivered are attached to large skyrockets, which are fired and reach the shore in safety.

One day W. A. Duffy, of Humboldt, Tenn., drove to his farm near town, and having some business to attend to on the place, took the horse loose from the shafts and hitched him to the wheel of the buggy. Mr. Duffy left his coat in the buggy, and on his return he found the animal had just finished eating the last of a package of notes aggregating \$1,076.

In China liquids are sold by weight and grain by measure. John buys soup by the pound, and cloth by the foot. A Chinaman never puts his name outside his shop, but paints instead a motto or a list of his goods on his vertical sign-board. Some reassuring remark is frequently added, such as: "One word hall," "A child two feet high would not be cheated." Every single article has to be bargained for, and it is usual for the customer to take his own measure and scales with him.

It is said that the ingenious young woman who invented the frilly doll penwipers has made money out of her idea. A clothespin is the nucleus of each penwiper. With this as the anatomical frame she produces brides, actresses, nuns, nurses—ladies, in short, of every degree. In order to conceal the clothespin extremities, long skirts in sumptuous folds characterize the gowns of Miss Penwiper; and the banker, the lawyer, and author wipe their pens on her petticoats. According to Brooklyn Life, the fame of these ladies has spread, and now their inventor has a partner and a factory.

"Sounds funny to hear of tobacco being grown in Canada, doesn't it?" said W. J. Clancy, of Toronto. "Not so much perhaps to Wisconsin people, who know that it is grown in this state, where the mercury frequently goes out of sight, but the average American thinks of the waving palms of the tropics as soon as tobacco culture is mentioned. It is a fact, however, that the weed is now grown with great success in Ontario and other provinces in the eastern part of the Dominion. So great have been the returns, in fact, that many farmers are giving up wheat growing, and are planting tobacco in their fields.

The passengers on a crowded crosstown car in Brooklyn, N. Y., one day last week felt the brakes applied with such suddenness that only a few of those who were standing withstood the jar. Then they saw the motorman jump from the platform and kneel in front of the car. Several of the passengers made their way out, and were surprised to see the

motorman stroking the feathers of a mother dove that sat on one of the rails with a little one under her wing. "I've never taken a life yet," he explained, as he placed them on the curb out of harm's way, "and I don't propose to start with a tame dove."

There is a certain war veteran in Boston whom we will call William Brown. He has an honorable record, and is fond of relating incidents of the rebellion. He often tells how he got a cut on the head from the sword of a Confederate cavalryman. There is a small bare place which he says was the scar of this wound. Many a time we who work in the same office with him have heard this story. Brown has a brother Charles who came into the office the other day to make a call. Bill was at his desk writing when Charlie walked up behind him, and giving him a slap on the shoulder, said jocosely, "Well, Bill, I see you still have that scar on your head where Butler's dog bit you when we were boys!" From that time one of Bill's war stories gets little credence from us.

In an obscure but picturesque little village of Germany there is a place called the "Chocolate Cure," where thin people go to become stout. The patients eat and drink cocoa and chocolate all the time, while they rest, admire the scenery, and grow fatter every day. The true secret of the great success of this treatment is the happy way chocolate has of fattening just the right places, settling in the hands, the arms, the neck, and the shoulders, making the fair patient prettier and plumper all the time. The really effective part of this cure may be tried at home by persevering women, and the medicine is so palatable and the method so simple that there is actually, it seems, no reason why all should not be of just the desired weight.

OUR COMIC COLUMN.

Teacher—Have you learned the Golden Rule, Tommy?
Tommy—Yes'm. It is to do to other people like they would do you.

"Supposing you woke up some day and found yourself a millionaire—what'd you do?" "Go right to sleep again, so that the knocking of the Tax Assessors on the door wouldn't annoy me."

"Did you drop this ten-dollar bill, mister?" "Why, yes; thank you!" "Well, it's counterfeit, an' if youse don't gib me er dollar I'll squeal on youse—see?"

Irate father (on shore)—Didn't I tell you not to go skating?
Quick-witted son—Stay where you be, pop. The ice is awful thin.

"No," said the convict, "there's some things in the prayer-book I can't believe, although I would like to." "What, for instance?" inquired the prison visitor. "Well, for instance, where it says, 'We are here to-day and gone to-morrow.'"

"There doesn't seem to be much use for you nowadays," said the codfish, "since they have found so many substitutes for whalebone and blubber that come cheaper." "No," sighed the whale. "About all I am good for now is to furnish the pure cod-liver oil of commerce."

Mother—You naughty boy! You've been fighting.
Little Son—No, mother. Mother—How did your clothes get torn and your face scratched?
Little Son—I was trying to keep a bad little boy from hurting a good little boy. Mother—That was noble. Who was the good little boy?
Little Son—Me.

Dickson—Remember that brilliant young fellow Tompkins who was in our class at college? Wonder what became of him. I always thought the world would hear from Tompkins. Richardson—It did. He became an auctioneer, afterward traveled as a barker for a sideshow, and is now beating the bass drum for the Salvation Army.

A DESPERATE DEAL

OR,

TRUE TO HIS HONOR

By ALEXANDER ARMSTRONG.

It was at the close of a fine day in January, when Ned Rackstraw, a manly-looking fellow, without a relative in the world, left the New Orleans bank in which he was employed as assistant cashier, and went home to his boarding-house.

He had his supper, and attiring himself in a uniform of the National Guard, as he was a member of the 3— Regiment, he went to drill at the armory and finished at an early hour.

Ned was in love with Carmen Fernandez, a beautiful Mexican girl, who lived with her father in a gloomy old mansion on the suburbs of New Orleans, and the youth had an engagement to call on her when the drill was over.

Accordingly, he set out on foot for the manor of stone, as the road was good and the moon shone occasionally from the cloudy sky, and after a brisk walk he reached his destination and met the girl in the garden at their regular trysting place.

The young couple spent an hour of exquisite pleasure together, strolling about the garden, and then, obeying an irresistible impulse, Ned proposed to the charming girl and she consented to become his wife.

"Your father may consider me presumptuous, Carmen," said the youth before he left her. "He has the reputation of being a very wealthy retired merchant of Vera Cruz, and may have aspired to seeing you the wife of a rich man, instead of marrying you to a poor bank clerk."

"Ah, Ned," laughed the pretty Mexican girl, "that is a matter he and I have never spoken of. He loves me dearly, and I am sure he would not blight my happiness by interfering with my own choice of a husband; and as for his wealth, it is true that he seems to have plenty of money always, yet I do not believe he will object on that ground."

"Then I shall soon call on him, Carmen, and ask his consent to our union. And now, as the hour is getting late, and I must get up early to-morrow, I will leave you."

And parting from the girl, Ned watched her until she entered the house, and turning away, he retraced his footsteps homeward.

He passed along the road, deeply thinking in a blissful strain about Carmen, and came to a place where each side was bordered by dense bushes, when out of the thicket sprang two men in front of him.

They each wore long black cloaks, slouched hats, and black masks over their faces, and as the startled youth recoiled with a cry of alarm they sprang upon him, ere he could defend himself, and while one powerful fellow pinioned his arms behind his back, the other clapped a sponge saturated with chloroform to his nostrils.

With scarcely a struggle the young bank clerk lapsed into sleep, and fell limply into the arms of the man who was holding him.

A hurried conversation passed in whispers between the two mysterious individuals, and they lifted the senseless figure of Ned between them, plunged into the thicket with him, and disappeared.

It was several hours afterward before the youth recovered from the effects of the drug, and recalled to mind what happened to him.

He could not understand why he had thus been assaulted.

Glancing around, he saw that he was in a stone dungeon, lying upon a heap of straw upon the floor, with a shackle padlocked around one of his ankles, the other end of its chain secured to the wall.

In front of him there was an iron barred door covered with rust, and high up in the wall over his head, in back, was a small window protected by an iron grating, through the dusty glasses covering which there streamed in a dim and sickly light.

Ned suffered a splitting headache from the effect of the

drug, and his throat was parched with thirst, while his mind was harassed by all sorts of doubts and fears over his peculiar situation.

He asked himself over and over again why he was made to suffer this assault, without being able to reach any reasonable conclusion, for he had not been robbed, and did not have an enemy in the world.

Fully an hour passed by, during which time he had an opportunity of getting accustomed to his situation, and then he heard hollow, echoing footsteps coming along the corridor upon which his cell opened, and the noise paused before his cell door.

There came the grating of a key in the lock, the sound of bolts being shot back, and a moment later one of his assailants of the previous night entered the cell, followed by an ugly looking negro with a bare head and bare feet, who wore over his pants and shoulders a long, ragged, striped cloak.

"At last!" exclaimed Ned, with a sigh of relief upon seeing these people. "I can now, perhaps, find out why I've been subjected to this outrageous treatment."

"Exactly," replied the masked man, with a nod. "I've come to explain it. You was kidnapped for a purpose, of course. That purpose is to force you to give us the combination of the safe of the New Orleans bank where you work!"

Something in the man's voice was familiar to Ned.

"You are a thief and have resorted to this method, then, to rob the bank!" he panted, his blue eyes flashing, and a flush of indignation mantling his face.

"Precisely," was the cool rejoinder. "We know that you are acquainted with the numbers of the combination, and always open the safe——"

"Ah! Now I know who you are!" interposed Ned, as the truth flashed across his mind. "I thought I knew your voice, Dick Derringer, and now I am convinced of it. Take off your mask. Further concealment of your identity is utterly useless, for I've seen the bank messenger too often, and heard you speak too frequently to make any mistake."

The masked man started violently, but recovering from the shock of surprise he received, a reckless laugh escaped him, and he lifted his hand, drew the mask off, and exposed the clean-shaven, crafty-looking features of a man of about fifty or thereabouts.

"Since you have so keenly penetrated my disguise I won't make any secret of my identity," he remarked, mockingly. "The sight of me will now convince you that you are dealing with a man who knows what he is talking about. I've embarked on a desperate scheme to rob the bank where I am working, as you can see, and I'll run long chances to carry my point. Confess what I want to know, and to-morrow you can go free; refuse, and by heavens, I'll starve you into compliance! Now, choose!"

"Betray my trust? Never!" indignantly exclaimed Ned. "I am in your power, Dick Derringer, and you may do as you like to me, as I am helplessly at your mercy, but you cannot force me to speak and dishonor myself by aiding you to commit this crime!"

"Very well. We will see what coercion will do. This nigger is Sambo. He is in the scheme to win a share of the bank's money by aiding us. Every day he will enter this cell and see if you have changed your mind. Until you confess you will remain here without food and water!"

The day passed monotonously by, night came, and he slept.

He was awakened at dawn by the most intense hunger and thirst, and a few hours afterward Sambo entered the cell.

"Goo' mawnin', sah," grinned the diabolical black wretch. "Massa wanter know ef yo' gib him de combination?"

"No!" thundered the boy. "No! I'll die first!"

The negro recoiled to the door, looking frightened at Ned's rage, and went away.

Another day of torture passed by, but when night came the boy could not sleep, and in the morning the dandy returned, and repeated his former question, to which the boy determinedly returned a negative answer, although he was sick for the want of food and water.

On the third day, with a refinement of cruelty that was awful, Sambo came in with a pitcher of cool, sparkling water,

and as he stood the pitcher upon the floor, where Ned could see it, but could not reach it, he said, with a fiendish grin:

"Massa Dick he say dat I'se gwine ter lebe it yere ter tantalize yo', chile."

Sambo went away, and the half-famished boy turned his back to the inviting water, so it couldn't tempt him, although there was an awful feeling gnawing at his heart that it was yet there, and he could hardly resist keeping his eager, anxious glance upon it.

The ensuing day passed by, but the negro did not materialize. A horrible fear now entered Ned's mind that he was to be left in maddening solitude too, even bereft of the miserable satisfaction to be derived from the brief companionship of the ugly negro.

All the noise he could make, shouting for help, he was assured by the negro would not be heard by anyone outside of the prison, so he did not exhaust himself making any such futile attempt, but lay there upon his wretched straw pallet, moaning until night fell.

The light was just dying out of his lonesome cell when Derringer came in. He glanced at the unfortunate prisoner remorselessly, and then exclaimed brutally:

"Well, haven't we broken your spirit yet?"

"Pity me!" groaned the poor fellow, rising upon his knees and raising his clasped hands to the author of his woe. "Derringer, this is unbearable. I can't stand it much longer. God knows my suffering is terrible—terrible!"

"You can easily save yourself, you fool!" was the unfeeling reply. "Give me the combination and I'll give you food, water, liberty, life!" hissed the man, thrillingly, as he crouched over his victim and fastened his burning, eager glance upon the youth, for he saw that his inhuman torture was unnerving Ned rapidly.

The youth was silent.

"Speak!" yelled the man, moving toward the door. "Now or never!"

"Stay!" shrieked Ned, wildly. "Yes! Yes! I'll tell you! I can't stand this any longer! I'm dying by inches—I—water! water! water!"

He fell back gasping on his couch of straw, and the man seized the pitcher, sprang to his side, and gave him a drink.

Oh, how it revived him—thrilled him—put life in him.

An exultant look crept into his dull eyes, a glow came to his pallid, sunken cheeks, and he wept, laughed, and raved in a paroxysm of hysteria painful to witness. In a moment more he told the evil character bending over him how to open the bank's vaults, and ere the last word of explanation was out of his lips Derringer rushed triumphantly from the cell, leaving the door wide open, while Ned fell to the straw in a faint.

It was several hours afterwards when he revived by feeling someone in the gloom laying his throbbing temples with cold water, and a moment afterwards he found that the shackles were filed from his ankle.

"Freedom! freedom!" he screamed, in a paroxysm of delight, and fearful lest he might be retaken, he bounded to his feet, and in a delirium of joy he rushed from the cell into the stone corridor. Along it he ran until he came to a door, and passing through it he fled up a flight of stairs, never pausing to learn who had liberated him. Out into a broad hall he dashed, and espying a door at the end, he opened it and rushed out into the clear light of heaven. Like a hunted stag he fled on across the open country, and panting and exhausted, he reached the city suburbs. A blindness overcame him, he reeled, fell, and everything became a blank. A policeman found him lying upon the ground and summoned an ambulance, which carried him to a hospital. Here he revived, and saw that the morning sun shone in the window. A short time afterwards he heard excited voices, and the president of the New Orleans bank and several of the directors came in.

"So they've got Ned Rackstraw here, eh?" he heard the president ask.

"Do you think he knows anything of the robbery of the bank?" someone asked.

"I'm sure he does!" sharply replied the president. "Only he and I knew the combination of the bank safe. I didn't tell it to the burglars, of course. His mysterious disappear-

ance looks suspicious. See the way you found him, right after our safe was robbed. Let me see him."

A cold chill passed over the young bank clerk. When the president, directors, a police captain and two policemen were grouped around his bedside, he saw that his appearance shocked them.

"The bank was opened with keys last night," said the president, "and over \$50,000 was stolen, as the thieves had the safe combination, Rackstraw. Now, will you give us an account of your mysterious disappearance?"

"Certainly, sir," was the prompt reply, and in weak tones the sufferer explained all the details of what had befallen him, but strangely enough he refrained from mentioning that his persecutor was Dick Derringer, the bank messenger.

"You escaped from your prison last night, you say?" asked the president, when the boy's recital was finished.

"I did," was the youth's reply.

"Do you know who the two thieves were?"

"I do."

"Ah! Then who were they?"

"I refuse to tell," replied Ned, chokingly.

"Do you know where the house was in which you were confined?"

"Yes—but I shall not tell you."

Ned's puzzling actions aroused everybody's suspicions.

"Clearly," said the president, turning to the police captain, "this boy is in league with the burglars. You had better hold him."

A thrill of horror shot through poor Ned, but he said nothing, for he had formed a certain resolution, and meant to follow it out. They were just about to leave the hospital, when a policeman came in with Carmen Fernandez, and said:

"Captain, here is a young woman who says she can tell you about the bank robbery, and—"

But, with a wild shriek, the Mexican girl interrupted the officer as she caught sight of her lover, and rushing over to the bed, she flung herself upon her knees there, caressed Ned tenderly, and bursting into a passionate fit of tears, she wailed: "Oh, Ned! Oh, Ned, my heart is broken!"

"Calm yourself! Keep silence!" he whispered.

"No, no!" she raved, springing to her feet, and facing the men who were assembled there. "There is no need of secrecy. I will tell all I know, Ned Rackstraw. I have discovered the truth from the lips of my dying father, whom Derringer shot."

"What do you mean?" asked the police captain.

"Ah, it is awful news!" gasped the girl, huskily. "My father was living a double life—outwardly a respectable, retired merchant; under cover of the night a thief! His accomplice was Dick Derringer. They planned to wrest from Ned the combination of the bank vault, and locked him in a cell in our cellar. They went out last night, and I discovered Ned and set him free. He ran away. This morning my father and Derringer returned, quarreled over the division of the money they stole from the bank, and Derringer shot my father. I overheard and saw everything, and fled after my father had made a full confession of his crime to me. I heard at the bank, where I went to confess, that Ned was here. My poor father is dead. His murderer is at our house! Capture him!"

The police captain dispatched several officers to make the arrest, and then everyone realized that Ned was innocent, and had refrained from exposing Carmen's father in order to spare his affianced wife the disgrace of seeing him incarcerated for his crime, for in escaping the youth saw where he had been imprisoned, and suspected Fernandez of complicity in the robbery.

The policemen came back with Sambo and Derringer, whom they had captured after a desperate struggle, and the stolen money was recovered.

The messenger broke down and confessed all after that, and he and the negro were tried, convicted, and sentenced to prison. Ned ultimately recovered, and was reinstated in the bank, honored for his loyalty to his employers in resisting the thieves so long in the face of the torture by starvation to which they put him. He married Carmen, and two happier souls than they are would be hard to find in the city where they live.

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